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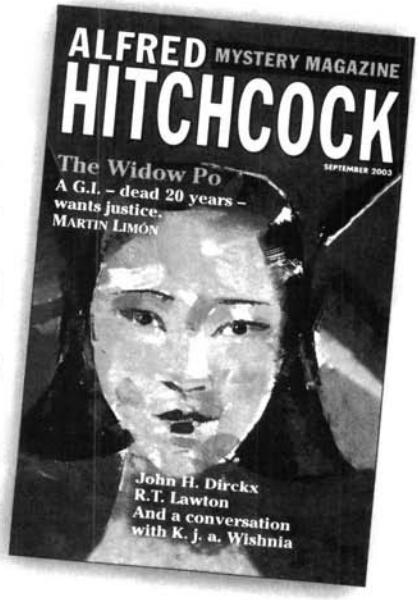

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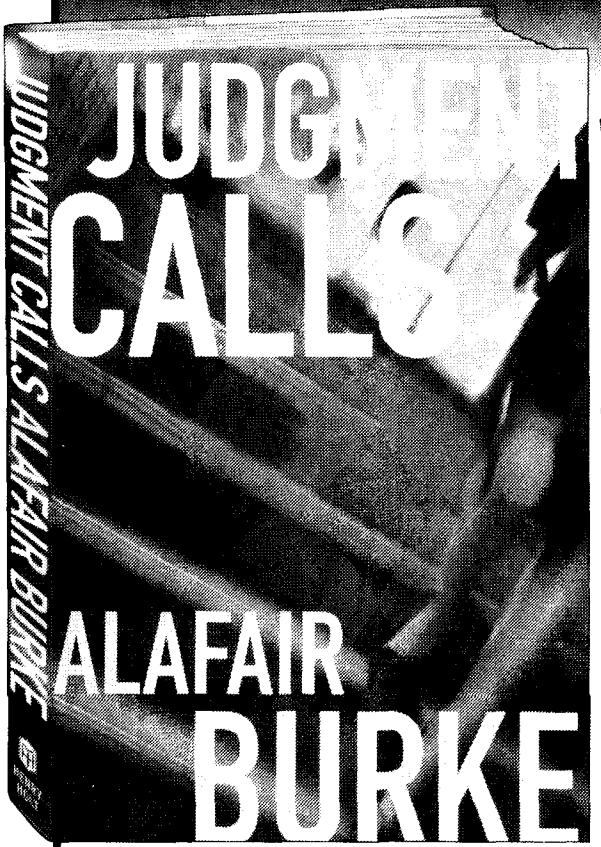

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ONE SHOT DIFFERENCE

by Brendan DuBois

The training session that day took place in an area of the decommissioned Air Force base that had once stored nuclear weapons for the B-52s and FB-111s stationed there. The Air Force bombers were long gone and it was mostly civilian aircraft that were now using the mile-long runway. Other parts of the base had been cut up and subdivided for high-tech firms, a passport-processing office for U.S. customs, and a regional bus system. Since no one had come up with a commercial use for the two dozen concrete bunkers half-buried in the soil, they had been abandoned when the base had closed years earlier. Each bunker was long and curved, covered with soil and grass, with a ventilation shaft poking out from the center. They looked quiet and peaceful, not at all like a place that had once stored weapons capable of incinerating a city and killing millions in a matter of seconds.

Craig Francis leaned against the hood of a Porter police department cruiser, watching the SWAT team members from a half-dozen local towns get suited up and ready for the day's session. His arms were folded and he was enjoying the early-morning sun. He

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was also enjoying seeing the cops goof around, eating donuts and drinking coffee and tossing footballs back and forth. Most of them were much younger than he was, quite muscular and strong, and they had the cocky attitude that came with being healthy, young, and on top of their game. He, on the other hand, was on the wrong side of forty years old, had never walked more than a mile at a time in his life, and had long ago ceased being cocky. Except for a young woman who worked as a dispatcher, talking to a couple of the cops, he was the only civilian among the early-morning crowd.

His real job was owner and manager of the Francis Farms convenience store in Porter, a popular place for the Porter cops. No cop ever paid for a cup of coffee or snack at his store, and in return, they kept an eye on the place and responded quickly whenever he needed them, for something as small as a teenage shoplifter or somebody who passed a bad check, or something as bad as a holdup.

It was a good arrangement, a comfortable arrangement, and sometimes it came with a few perks, like today. The cops from Porter and other towns that belonged to the regional SWAT response team were conducting a training session, and they needed a couple of volunteers to serve as criminals, to make the training more realistic. Craig had done it a few times before and found it fun; though he usually ended the day with bumps, bruises, and once, a bloody nose, it had always been worth it.

But today . . . well, today was going to be different. He looked around at the cops as they put on their protective vests, their Kevlar helmets, their kneepads and gloves, and saw one Porter cop tossing a football to another. Even among the other cops, he stood out. Dirk Conrad. Twenty-seven years old, black hair shorn quite short. Even with the protective gear and body armor, it was easy to tell from the swell of his upper arms and chest that he spent a lot of his time working out.

Dirk spotted Craig looking at him, grinned, and gave him a big wave. Craig waved back with a smile. Craig knew a lot about Dirk: where he had grown up, where he had gone to school, and how he was doing with the department. Dirk was a crack shot, tough on the streets, was on a fast track for promotion, and made it clear

An *EQMM* Department of First Stories author, New Hampshireman Brendan DuBois has become a prolific writer of series mysteries, stand-alone thrillers, and short stories. He has two new books out this year, a collection of stories from Five Star (*Tales from the Dark Woods*) and a thriller about MIAs in Vietnam. The latter, *Betrayed,* appeared first in England (Time Warner U.K.; followed in the U.S. by Thomas Dunne Books).

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that he intended to get out of the department one of these days and try for the FBI or CIA. He had big plans to go with those big muscles, and Craig knew that, and more.

He shifted his weight on the cruiser and lifted his head up to the sun. For Craig also knew that young Dirk Conrad was having an affair with Craig's wife Stacy, and for that, Craig planned on ending Dirk's life today, in the midst of all his fellow cops.

The thought and the bright sunshine on his face made him smile.

And the hell of it was, he had never intended to run that damn convenience store. It had belonged to his father, and he had worked plenty of afternoons and weekends—giving up school activities like track or band or the school newspaper, and especially dances and proms—to help out the family and make some pocket change. Sacrifices, Dad had said. To get ahead you need to make sacrifices. But once he had gone to college and nailed his Business Administration degree, he was ready to shake off Porter and raise some hell and make some money, and forget about sacrifices for a while.

But Dad had gotten a rare blood disease that seemed to eat him from the inside out, and since he was their only boy—his three older sisters had already found husbands and had children by then—Dad had pleaded with him not to sell the store. Francis Farms had opened in Porter in 1902, with Craig's great-grandfather, and Dad didn't want the store and the name to die with him.

Fine. A promise to a dying man and he had given it, knowing he had other plans, other ideas, and yet . . .

The trap had been set.

He had taken over the store and within a week knew that the reverse was true: The store had taken over him. Each day was a rolling morass of problems to be solved, problems to be addressed, problems to be ignored. Employees who didn't show up or who showed up late. Delivery trucks blocking the parking lot for the customers. Health inspectors. Youngsters with fake IDs trying to buy beer. Liquor inspectors. Employees who stole, customers who stole, people wandering by the front of the store who stole. Water bill, tax bill, oil bill, electricity bill . . . Mother of God, the amount of money spent each month on electricity (for the freezers and coolers and lights and everything else) was as much as he spent on renting an apartment while going to college! Sweeping up and cleaning up after some three-year-old girl who, racing through, knocked over a display of grape-jelly jars. People coming in looking to put up posters in the window, people looking to sell raffle tickets, people looking for donations to this charity or that charity and don't you know, it's the duty of business owners to support the neighborhood?

Trapped. Within a week, it felt as if the chains of responsibility had been gently but firmly clasped around his ankles.

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Oh, he could have given up after a month or so, but there was that streak of stubbornness in him, combined with the promise he had made to Dad, dear old Dad, to keep the damn place running.

Sacrifices.

And so he had remained, in a life of work and not enough sleep and never any real days off, until the day Stacy came by next-door, to open a hair salon.

And then it had all changed.

One of the police officers—who had a thick moustache and was wearing a bright orange vest with TRAINING stenciled in black, fore and aft—stepped out into the middle of the crowd and said, "Listen up, people, listen up. It's time to get started."

The cop went on about how the SWAT team would split up into different groups and work through different scenarios during the day. Two of the old bunkers would be used during the training session. Some years ago, the cop explained, Navy SEAL members had come to this very place and had constructed in the bunkers rooms made of wooden doors and plywood walls. Craig thought about that, and as the cop went on and on in great detail about the training that was going to take place, he wandered over to the closest bunker. The metal door—rusting at the hinges—had been propped open, and he stepped inside, the interior cool and damp. The floor and the walls and curved ceiling were concrete, and there was faded paint on the concrete, marking some sort of grid. Before him, just a few yards in from the entrance, was a wooden warren of rooms and corridors. He slowly walked through them in the dim light, wondering how it felt to race through here, even in a training session, knowing that something bad was waiting for you.

He paused and touched the walls and a nearby door. He shivered, remembering what the training officer had said. Navy SEALs—elite warriors—had been in this same room, had built these rooms to help themselves train, and now, well, where were they? Afghanistan? Iraq? Yemen? So far from home. He wondered if they ever thought about the training they had done at this old air base in New Hampshire, and he wondered what they would think about what he had planned for the training session today.

He had a feeling most of them would understand.

Craig turned and went back outside.

Stacy Moore had come in one summer day to introduce herself, and Craig couldn't remember much of what he said to her, for he was struck by how beautiful she was. She had on tight jeans, a white knit sleeveless shirt that was unbuttoned far enough to show a fair amount of cleavage, and her blond hair was tied back in a simple ponytail. She said she had taken over the lease next-

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door, was opening up a hair salon—"Stacy's Hair Design"—and could he do her a favor?

Absolutely, had been his reply. She had needed power—"Damn Public Service is late in coming by"—and would he mind if she ran a power cord from his store to her place?

Thinking about that request had taken about a second or two.

Not a problem, he had said. He had even helped her bring in some supplies, admiring the way she filled out her clothes, admiring her laugh, and when he was through moving things and hooking up things, she had blushed slightly and said, Well, I wish I could pay you back for your help.

He had laughed. My pleasure, he had said. Really.

She had folded her arms, exposing even more of her cleavage, and said, Well, how about a free haircut?

And in a matter of moments he had been seated in one of the chairs, warm water cascading over his head, her strong fingers working at his scalp, working in the shampoo, and he looked up at her figure and her smile, and he knew without a doubt that he was falling in love.

Outside, he joined the dozen or so cops, nodding at all the Porter cops he knew, and even Dirk managed another smile in his direction. The training officer lined everyone up—except, of course, for Craig and the young woman dispatcher named Sarah—and started referring to a clipboard held in his hand.

"All right, let's get a move on, we've only got a few hours to work with," he said. "You know the drill, you know the scenarios. Now it's time for a safety check. Everybody check your weapons, check your belongings. No live rounds. No edged weapons. This is just training. Leave the real stuff behind."

Before the line of cops were two long folding tables, and on the tables were plastic ammo boxes, opened up, showing round after round of simulated ammunition. Craig wandered over and examined one of the bullets, recalling when he had first seen these little bundles of power. They had the same brass jacket as any other semiautomatic 9mm. round, but the amount of powder inside the cartridge was smaller than for a regular bullet, and the slug at the top was a type of paintball. It stung and left a brief red splotch of paint, and that was that. Every cop here today would load their weapons with these fake rounds, and while they stung some, it sure beat the hell out of the real thing. And it helped with the training, especially with two "bad guys"—him and Sarah—deep within the rooms, waiting in ambush for the squads of SWAT members to come barreling through.

He put the fake round down and then, almost absent-mindedly, he put his hand in his pants pocket where he felt something small

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and hard and metallic.

Another 9mm. round, just like the ones on the tables.

Except this one was the real thing.

He smiled, went back, and joined the cops.

Craig had been thrilled and thankful when Stacy had agreed to go out with him, and soon they were a couple. It had been so easy at first, with her working right next-door to him, and he had made a habit of popping in and out during the day, bringing over drinks and sandwiches at lunch, and sometimes they had managed to have lunch out on the sidewalk, watching the people of Porter go by. He would check with her as she closed up, making sure she could get to the bank all right with her deposits—the block they were on could be rough at certain times of the night during certain times of the year—and he would juggle the schedules of his workers so he could have at least one night a week with her.

She was from Dover, the next city over, and was a high-school grad who just wanted to have her own business using the only skills she really had, as a hairdresser. After a while, when she had learned about his business-school experience, she had shyly asked him to examine her books. He had made a dreadful joke about having already examined other personal parts of her, and her books would be relatively easy, but he stopped laughing when he looked at her piles of receipts and bills.

Stacy's Hair Design was in debt, was sinking faster than the *Titanic,* and unless something drastic happened, and soon, she would be facing personal and business bankruptcy.

After telling her this, and after seeing the tears erupt, he had offered something drastic: marriage.

And happiest of days, she had said yes.

With the briefing over, the training officer came over and handed him a revolver. "Still know how to use this, Craig?"

"Without a doubt," he said.

"Sorry we only have one spare," he said. "Looks like you and Sarah will have to share."

"Not a problem."

Before going into the bunker, he put on his own protective gear: gloves, old fatigue jacket, a thin vest that covered his back and front, and a foam-lined plastic helmet with a clear plastic front. It was hard to talk with the helmet on, and when he and Sarah got into the bunker, he lifted up the helmet and said, "You want to have the gun first?"

Sarah was small and thin, with brown hair and big brown eyes. Earlier he had learned she had been a dispatcher with the department for only six months. She lifted her own helmet and grinned.

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"Really?"

"Sure," he said. "I've done this before. You go ahead and have fun."

She took the large revolver in her small hands and said, "Oh, you know it. Lots of these guys love to give me crap on the job. It's gonna be fun to get some payback."

He smiled back. "I know the feeling."

So a month after their marriage, she had come to him and said that as much as she hated to do it, it was time to close the hair shop. And he had said, Not a problem, you can work at the store. As assistant manager. Not a problem. Which was true. Stacy's Hair Design had gone out of business, his new wife had moved six feet over to her new job, and then, well, it began to crumble.

Simple things at first. Working with the spouse, the whole day long, just a few feet away from each other, meant no quiet time, no alone time. Little quirks of hers that earlier had been fun and amusing started to grate on him. Her humming. The way she picked at her fingernails. And the way she always seemed to dress with her cleavage exposed. And there was more to follow. She didn't like the way he arranged the shelves, he didn't like the way she'd chat away with a customer while a line formed. She thought he was too bossy, he thought she took too much time on breaks.

Their life revolved around the store, the store, all glory to the store, and lots of times, at the end of the day, they would both fall into bed, speak only a few words to each other, and then fall asleep. The only difference in the days of the week was that on Sunday, the newspapers for sale in the store were fatter.

That's when he started to become frightened that everything was beginning to fall away with his life and marriage. Sacrifices, he thought, when do the damn sacrifices stop?

But then hope came, from a most unlikely source: the federal government.

SCENARIO ONE:

The SWAT team was breaking into a house with two known drug dealers, one of whom was believed to be armed. Craig's role was to be the first drug dealer spotted, and he was sitting in a plastic chair, hands in his lap. The training officer said he was to cooperate and not put up any fuss, which was fine. There would be plenty of time for fuss later. Young and eager Sarah was somewhere deeper into the rooms, and he had wished her good luck and good aim.

Sounds. Booted feet tromping on the floor, low whispers, and then, like some nightmare vision from an Orwell book, the armed and well-equipped police came through the door. Even though he was expecting it and had done this several times before, his heart raced at the sight of these bulky armed men coming right at him.

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They had on goggles and helmets and protective vests and black fatigues and gloves and military boots, and some were holding out 9mm. pistols while others were carrying 9mm. submachine guns, and the moment Craig was spotted the screaming started, words tumbling over one another, echoing in the confines of the bunker.

"Police!"

"Search warrant!"

"Down on the ground!"

"Down on the ground, now!"

"Show us your hands!"

"Now!"

"Now!"

"Now!"

Craig's heart was really thumping and he held out his hands and dropped to his knees on the concrete floor, and then stretched out. Hands expertly searched him, looking for any weapons—and a horrid thought suddenly came to him: Suppose the real round of 9mm. ammunition was found?—and when somebody yelled, "Hands to your back!" he moved his hands to his back and crossed his wrists. There was a squeeze at the wrists and another voice said, "Secure!" and he turned his head, seeing the booted feet fly by. Another part of the training. No handcuffs, no plastic restraints. He was now a prisoner, and he played along and waited.

Some other noises, of voices, as the police moved into the other rooms.

"Clear!"

"Okay."

"Checking . . ."

"Hold on . . ."

"Gun!"

"Gun!"

And the gunfire erupted into the short and ferocious *pop-pop-pop* of practice rounds being expended, and more yells, more shouts, and then a whistle was blown by the training officer. Scenario completed.

Craig rolled over and sat up, removed his helmet. The SWAT members came back in as he stood up, some laughing, a couple of them looking embarrassed, with splotches of red paint smeared across their black fatigues. One guy said, "Hah, look at that, you got nailed by a girl," and the other cop responded, with some bravado, "Man, the number of times I've nailed girls, I just decided it was time to let one of 'em have some payback."

Then Sarah came in, smiling, her helmet off and her hair matted down. Her protective vest was smeared with a half-dozen paintball rounds, and she was shaking one of her hands, as if she had just burnt it on a stovetop. The other hand held the large

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revolver. "Man, that stung! Man, did that hurt! But I got some of you back, I surely did." And she laughed.

"All right," the training officer said. "Time for a debriefing. Sarah and Craig, if you can excuse us, please."

"Sure," he said, walking out of the bunker and blinking in the sunshine, helmet under his arm. Sarah was with him, still smiling. "That was some fun, but you know what?" she said.

"What?"

"I knew they were coming, I knew what they were going to do, but I was still scared. I was breathing hard and when they came into the room, I almost peed myself. Funny, huh?"

"No, same thing happens to me, all the time," he said.

She wiped at her face. "How come they did that?"

"Did what?"

"Asked us to leave."

Craig said, "So they can have a debriefing without a couple of civilians hanging around, that's why. In some ways, we're just guests here. That's all. Nothing to get offended about."

"Oh, I'm not offended," she said. "Just curious."

"Good."

She then smoothed her hair and said, "I fired off all six rounds. Time to load up."

"Go right ahead," he said. "It'll be awhile."

So he sat on the grass while she went over to the table with the simulated ammunition. She undid the cylinder of the revolver, emptied out the spent brass cartridges, and then reloaded with the paintball rounds. Young Sarah worked quickly, efficiently, and Craig smiled at her hurry, since the cops were all still in the bunker taking part in the debriefing session.

He turned his head up to the sun and waited.

The news had come first from a story in the Porter *Herald.* In some mysterious way, grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development were trickling into the city of Porter. Some of that money was going to be used in the neighborhood where the store was located, as part of "Renovation" and "Revitalization" and "Revamping" and other words that began with the letter R.

Interesting enough, he had thought, leafing through the newspaper as he waited for a young boy to count out seventy-five pennies so he could buy a candy bar, but the news got even more interesting when a couple of real-estate developers wandered by. And that had been the deal: They were going to grab a chunk of that development money, and if Craig and his suffering wife were interested—were they ever!—then the store and the building would be purchased at a very reasonable price, and would then be turned into low-price apartments for welfare recipients or higher-

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priced apartments for senior citizens, depending on which interest group was making the most noise that year.

And his eyes had watered with tears, real tears of sheer joy, at seeing the proposals the real-estate agents had provided, for it meant a lot of money, enough for some time off and a fresh start for him and the woman he had married.

Maybe the time for sacrifice was over. And for the first time in months, things had been looking up.

At least for a while.

SCENARIO TWO:

A raid on another drug den. The cops coming in weren't told how many people were in there or how they were armed. Sarah seemed eager to be the shooter again, and Craig said that was fine. His role was to be half-hidden in the corner of one of the rooms, and the training officer had told him to freelance, to do whatever he wanted.

Such an invitation.

So this time, Craig stood flat against a wall with his hand down at his side. It was a bit of a gamble, but he had taken one of his black gloves off and had rolled it up to make a cylinder. That was at his side, and he waited, breathing hard, the plastic on his helmet fogging up. Somewhere in there, Sarah was waiting with eager anticipation, and in a way, so was he.

Voices again, the sounds of the boots on the concrete.

He waited, heart now thumping merrily along.

They were closer now, in the other room. Voices, low and indistinct.

He could see the play of flashlight beams on the far wall.

Very close.

A cop came into the room, holding a 9mm. pistol in front of him, two other cops behind him, and Craig stepped out, quickly raising his arm, holding out the rolled-up glove and—

"Gun!"

Damn, he could actually see the muzzle flashes erupt from the barrel as the cop coming into the room fired at him, and the paintball rounds struck his chest with a soft thud. He dropped and rolled onto the floor, letting the glove fall out of his hand, and he heard the cop who had just shot him mutter, "Oh hell, did I screw up," when he realized Craig wasn't armed.

On the cold concrete floor, Craig smiled.

More movement, more voices, and then another shout, deeper inside the bunker, of "Gun!" and more gunfire. Craig kept on smiling as the whistle blew and he sat up. The cop who had shot him had lifted up his helmet, and the smile faded as Craig realized who it was: Dirk Conrad.

Dirk shook his head. "Man, you got me, you really did."

"It happens," he said, feeling good at seeing the shocked expres-

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sion on that usually confident face. Dirk had on the usual SWAT gear, but he noticed something else, as well: a yellow smiley-face button, right in the center of the vest. Like some sort of mocking talisman or good-luck charm.

The training officer came over, his face set. "Time for a debrief. Excuse us, will you?"

"Sure," Craig said, and he was outside again, joined shortly by the police dispatcher. Sarah frowned and said, "They were better this time. I don't think I got anybody but they really nailed me good. What about you?"

"Held up a glove and got shot."

She laughed. "That's something."

Craig found a spot and sat down on the cracked asphalt, leaned back against the concrete wall of the bunker. Sarah joined him and he caught a whiff of her perfume. Something young, something sporty. He suddenly found that he was envious of her youth, her wide-open future.

"Sure, that's something," he said. "But it can also mean a lot of trouble for Dirk and for the department, down the road."

"How's that?"

He rubbed his chest where it still stung from the shot by the paintball, even under the protective pad. This time tomorrow he'd have a nice purple and green bruise there to remind him of this day, as if he would need any additional reminding.

"Thing is, let's say in a year or two Dirk's involved in a shooting of a suspect. Could be clear, could be a righteous shooting. Still, the guy's defense attorney might want to find out the background of the nice cop who shot his client. So he'd subpoena the department's training records for Dirk, to see if he found anything questionable. Bingo, there's a record that during this particular training session, he fired at a person holding nothing more threatening than a glove. See the trouble?"

"God, I guess so," she said, the revolver large and still in her lap. "Tell me, how do you know so much about cops?"

"Experience," he said. "Simply experience."

Sure, things had been looking up for him and Stacy and the store, until something happened. That was the way of the world now. You made plans and thought things through and thought everything would work out, and then Something Happened. This time, the something was a bit of Congressional backstabbing and backslapping that meant funds allocated for Porter went to Portland, Maine, or Portland, Oregon, or some other place. Which meant the eager real-estate agents who had been sniffing around the store went away and never came back. Which meant that a week after he had turned down an offer for the store from one of the agents—

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confident that a counteroffer would come back later that was larger and better—Stacy just looked over at him from behind the store counter, lining up lottery tickets, and said with quiet bitterness, "Some life, huh? Some life."

And what could he have said? That there would always be sacrifices?

So he had gone along, done the best he could to run the store and work and live with Stacy, and then, well, something clicked. It had just seemed to him that the only times she was happy, smiling, and engaged were when there were cops around the store. Pretty funny, eh? Cops who were supposed to serve and protect were now making his wife happy. And one night . . . well, he had gone back to the store by accident. Or had it been accidentally-on-purpose? He still wasn't sure. All he remembered was that he had left some receipts at the store and when he got back there, had gone through the door, the little bell jangling, there had been Stacy, and there had been Officer Dirk Conrad. Stacy had been leaning over the counter, buttons on her tight black sweater undone just so, and Dirk had been grinning the grin of somebody who had seen this sight before and had enjoyed it very much.

And the look from the both of them, as he unexpectedly came up the main aisle, told him everything he needed to know.

The third scenario was delayed until after lunch. For a while the SWAT team members trained by themselves in the two bunkers, learning how to better enter and sweep the rooms. Craig and Sarah were left alone for a while, and while Sarah got on her cell phone and talked for long and dreary moments to her boyfriend Toby, Craig went over to a sunny side of the bunker and stretched out his legs. Before him was grassland and then a tall chain-link fence topped off by razor wire, and on the other side of the fence, the ground was cleared out for about fifty feet to the treeline. Up on the slight rise leading to the access road was a locked gate, so that the cops wouldn't be disturbed. All of this land where once nuclear weapons had been stored, and where armed Air Force security police were authorized to use deadly force, was now a nature preserve. The officers out here at night, armed and ready, had probably thought this place would last forever.

But things change, he thought. Boy, do they ever change.

Late one afternoon a couple of weeks ago, he had been in their living room in their apartment, waiting, a black videocassette cartridge in his hand. It seemed heavy enough to be made of lead. A few weeks earlier, he had gone into the back office of the store and rewired and reconnected an old security-camera system that kept watch on the store and the back office. He supposed he should

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have told Stacy. Right. He guessed he should have, but he hadn't, so there you go.

So what now?

A voice whispered inside of him to toss it aside, get rid of it, never to view what might be stored forever on the magnetic impulses on the thin tape. Little impulses of energy that had the power to destroy his marriage. All right there.

He juggled the tape with some difficulty, cursed under his breath, and then went over and slid it into the VCR on top of the television set. On top of the VCR was a framed photo of him and Stacy on their wedding day, and blinking hard, he turned the photo around and picked up the remote.

Grainy images inside the store, not much going on. He used the fast-forward button, toggled it hard, until . . .

Until there he was. Dirk Conrad. Alone in the store with Stacy. There was no sound, so he couldn't tell what was being said between them, but what the hell. He knew they weren't discussing the latest zoning-board proposal. The screen was split in two. The left-hand side showed the countertop where Dirk and Stacy were conversing. The right-hand side was his office, and it was blank, since the lights weren't on.

And then it happened. Stacy and Dirk slid out of view on the left-hand side, and then the right-hand side of the tape lit up, and there was the interior of his office. Dirk brought Stacy around to his desk—his own damn desk!—holding her hand, and that little betrayal right there—holding another man's hand, even though Craig knew what was going to happen next—bore right through him like a drill bit from an oil rig, churning its way into his chest.

Stacy started unbuttoning her blouse. Craig got up and switched everything off, and then went into the bathroom to vomit.

Lunchtime. The overhead sun was high up and it was hot, and as in the other training sessions, sandwiches and drinks and snacks were produced from little portable coolers. The cops stripped off their helmets and gloves and vests and weapons, and dumped them on one of the long tables where the ammunition was stored. Young Sarah brought her revolver over and did the same thing, and he waited, waited long minutes, like the time waiting for a retiree to find a dollar bill in his wallet for a lottery ticket, and when he thought the time was right, he went over to the table. Some cops were now in the tall grass, dozing, while others tossed a football back and forth. Craig got up and stretched and reached into his pants pocket for the real 9mm. round. He went to the table and did his work quickly and efficiently, and then went back to the bunker and waited.

"All right, people," the training officer said, "time for the third

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scenario."

And when Sarah came back, holding the revolver in her hand, Craig held out his hand.

"Do you mind?" he asked. "I'd like to have a chance at shooting someone."

She smiled and handed the revolver over. "Sure, why not. I've already done it twice. Why should I have all the fun?"

He smiled in return. "Exactly."

Ever since he'd viewed the tape, it had been odd, but Stacy had been kinder and gentler to him, as if she was feeling sorry for him or something. A hell of a feeling. The tape had remained hidden and unviewed, and he was still trying to decide what in hell to do when one day, Dirk Conrad had shown up at his store.

Talk about your challenges. Underneath the counter of his store he had a sawed-off baseball bat, and wouldn't Dirk have been surprised if that had been swung at his noggin when he came over to chat after getting another in a long series of free cups of coffee. Instead he gritted his teeth and held his ground, and made small talk with Dirk as he got his free newspaper and free cup of coffee, and he imagined in some way that Dirk probably thought the free wife from the store owner went with everything else.

So. All those thoughts were tumbling through him and again he was wondering what to do when Dirk said, "Hey, next week we're going up to the base again, doing another SWAT training session. You interested?"

Hell no, was his thought, but he decided to be polite. "I guess so."

Dirk nodded, put the folded-up newspaper under his arm. "That'd be great. We could have some real fun."

"Sure," Craig said, and damn it, that could have been the end of it, except for one thing.

As Dirk left the store, he looked back and winked.

Pretty simple.

A wink, as if he knew he was pulling something over on Craig, knew it and enjoyed it, and Craig was surprised at how the anger just roared through him, making his ears echo with the noise, and by the time the door closed behind Dirk, Craig knew that he would go to that SWAT training session and end Dirk's life.

SCENARIO THREE:

An armed gunman was hidden in a house with an accomplice who was unarmed. They had earlier robbed a bank, and the armed gunman was threatening to kill anybody who came in.

Sarah gave him a pat on the shoulder and said, "Good luck," and Craig said, "Thanks," as he took a long series of deep breaths, the revolver fat and heavy in his hands. Sarah was deeper in the

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rooms, waiting, and he wondered what she would think about this particular scenario, which came up in his mind like so:

Real scenario three: Porter resident and store owner takes revenge against cop having an affair with his wife.

He was in the second room, hidden behind a table and chair. His breathing sounded harsh in his protective helmet. He waited.

And wondered briefly what Stacy would think when this day was over. She had covered the day shift for him so he could do this training session, and amazingly so, she had kissed him on the cheek when he had left and had murmured, "Have fun."

Have fun. Did she really mean it? Was she now regretting what had gone on between her and Dirk? Could it be over? Seeing her standing behind the counter, just as he was leaving, he had been stunned by his feelings of warmth and love and affection for her, even though she had betrayed him.

But who had betrayed whom first, with all the long hours, the sacrifices, the demands placed upon her?

Voices, outside. He raised the revolver, found his hand was shaking so hard he had to hold the gun with both hands.

He could not afford to miss. Could not afford to shake.

The approaching voices grew louder.

Two days earlier, he had sat in the apartment looking again at the black videocassette tape. He hadn't viewed it since that first day, and had hidden it in a rear closet behind some shoes. He knew what he was planning, and when it was all said and done, when things were wrapped up, he wasn't going to have this tape in his home. So among the other plans, he made plans to get rid of it, and soon.

Quick, quick, quick, he thought, Jesus, it's going to be quick. No more time to think, no more time to reconsider, it was way too late for that.

"Police!"

"Search warrant!"

"Hands up!"

The forms came into view and he raised his gun and waited, waited until he saw the SWAT team member with the little yellow button on his chest, and he pulled the trigger and pulled the trigger and the shots started ringing out and the fire continued and *BAM!* something struck his chest with the force of a telephone pole being swung by a giant.

Cold. Wet. He opened his eyes, could hear voices in the distance, yelling and screaming. Hands were working over him, tugging at his clothes, getting them off. His chest ached and ached and he couldn't catch his breath. It was as if he had run the race of his life and everything was now still. He opened his eyes and saw the

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glare of flashlights being trained down upon him.

He thought he was still in the bunker.

Cold. Wet. And now the wetness was warm.

And he thought he could hear sirens, off in the distance, and hoped somebody would remember to open up the gate in time.

And he closed his eyes.

It took some waiting, but eventually they did arrive in his hospital room, a couple of days before he was due to be discharged. The bullet wound in his chest was healing nicely and the pain was now just a manageable ache. Two solid-looking men in business suits, looking both professional and slightly embarrassed, came in and sat down. They mentioned their names and he forgot both names instantly, but in his mind he called one of them Lawyer and the other Cop. Both had thin black briefcases, which they balanced on their knees.

The cop started it off. "Mr. Francis, once again, I want to offer my personal apologies, as a member of the Porter Police Department, for what happened to you last week."

He nodded. The lawyer jumped in as well. "And for the city of Porter, too, Mr. Francis—you also have our apologies."

"Thank you," he said, keeping his voice low and hoarse, though truth be told, he was doing better than he had expected when he had planned the whole thing out, when the utter insanity of what he came up with struck him and he thought about all the sacrifices he had made for that damn store, and now, he had made his final sacrifice. A big one, but one that would count. He knew Dirk was a crack shot, knew he would aim for the center of his body, and chances were, his heart or any other vital organ wouldn't be struck. A chance, a crazy chance, but what the hell. The other options seemed worse. He did not want to lose Stacy . . . Stacy, who had come in blubbering and teary the day he had been admitted, and had Confessed All.

The cop said, "Before we go on, Mr. Francis, I need to talk a bit about the status of Officer Conrad."

He said nothing. The cop looked embarrassed and said, "A day after the shooting, a videotape arrived at our Internal Affairs office, mailed anonymously. Um, I'm afraid the tape was from a surveillance system at your store. You do have such a system, do you not?"

"I do," he said, keeping still.

The cop said, "Well. It seems that, um, the tape showed . . . well, it showed a woman I believe to be your wife and Officer Conrad in a rather intimate encounter. In your store. Mr. Francis, we believe somebody at the store, perhaps a disgruntled employee or somebody like that, mailed the tape to the department."

He tried to put a bit of shock into his voice. "Why are you telling me this?"

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The lawyer stepped in. "We believe that when Officer Conrad's future is determined, the local news media might find out about this tape. We're sorry, but we felt you should know about this beforehand. I mean, well, were you aware that Officer Conrad and your wife were . . . involved?"

He turned his head on the pillow and said, "I really don't want to talk about it."

Stacy, in this room, begging forgiveness, begging understanding, willing and able to do anything he wanted to make it right.

The cop came back. "We understand completely. And Mr. Francis, you should know that by the end of this week—even though his union might make a fuss—Officer Conrad will be off the force. His shooting of you, combined with the relationship he had with your wife . . . it makes his continued future with our department and in any law-enforcement department in this country impossible. He may even face criminal charges when all is said and done."

He knew they couldn't see his face, so he allowed himself just a brief smile. "I see."

It was the lawyer's turn. "Mr. Francis, if I could have your attention for just a moment. As counsel for the city, we have an interest in reaching an equitable settlement so that this doesn't have to go to court, waste your time and the city's time, cost you attorney's fees and so forth. I'm prepared today to make such a settlement offer to you."

The lawyer opened his briefcase and passed over a sheaf of papers, and clipped to the top of the papers was a cashier's check. Craig kept his emotions in check as he looked at the numbers. He looked at the lawyer and the cop.

"I sign this and drop any claims against the city, and this check is mine?" he asked.

"That's correct."

He handed the papers and the check back to the lawyer. "Change the five on the check to a seven and you got yourself a deal."

The cop looked at the lawyer, the lawyer looked at the cop, and there was the briefest of nods back and forth. The lawyer put the papers back in his briefcase and stood up. "Then we have a deal, Mr. Francis. We'll be back within the hour."

He smiled at both men as they left his hospital room, and checked the time. Stacy would be coming by shortly, and then, well, he'd pass the news along. The store would go up for sale, and combined with the city settlement, there was plenty there to start new, start fresh, and get out of Porter. He had taken a bullet for his life and his marriage, and that was the fact. And with the size of that check . . . he was in a forgiving mood towards Stacy.

The time for sacrifices was over, and it just took one shot.

Not a bad deal. ●

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Darkened Drops of Red

by Jay Alter

Sir Quentin and his fair Elaine strode out upon the sward
To steal a quiet moment from the celebrating horde.
The shadowed wood did beckon them.
The cooling breeze did sigh.
The lady caught a lusty gleam within her lordship's eye.
But deep within the cozy copse a painful moan did sound
And soon the lovers noticed
Drops of red were sprinkled 'round.
The knight stretched out a gauntlet
And touched a scarlet smear.
"Forsooth, Elaine," Sir Quentin said,
"Foul mischief happened here.
The archers in their joyous zeal have let their arrows fly.
Some forest creature mort'ly pierced
Has crawled away to die.
'Twas careless of those fellows.
They shall feel my rightful wrath."
But quoth the fair Elaine to him,
"Please, Pete, I need a bath.
This corselet's crushed my ribs and waist.
The headdress weighs a ton.
You can run around in sword and spurs,
But I'm not having fun."
And turning on her slippered foot
From the dappled glade she ran,
Leaving her weekend warrior, a young dejected man.
"Pat, wait," he cried and then he spied
A limp and bloody hand.
"Oh, help me," said a wretched voice, "Please help me or I'll die."
But frightened of legalities, Pete let the victim lie.
He soon joined Pat, they drove on home
To air-conditioned clime.
A movie and hot popcorn would now occupy their time.
But far away bright moonlight shines upon the newly dead.
And gleaming still upon the grass
Are darkened drops of red.

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Art by Jason C. Eckhardt

Cupid's Arrow

by Marilyn Todd

"Let me see if I've got this right."

Claudia stopped pacing and ticked the points off on her fingers.

"In six days' time, we, as producers and merchants of fine wines, celebrate the Vinalia, when no lesser light than the priest of Jupiter himself will pronounce the auspices for the forthcoming vintage?"

"Correct, madam."

"Except," she turned to face her steward, "we have no grapes to lay on his altar on the Capitol as offerings?"

"Correct."

"Because some clod on my estate came down with a sniffle and the bailiff took it upon himself to quarantine the entire workforce?"

"To be fair, madam, the clod in question was the bailiff himself. He did not feel he could jeopardise the harvest by exposing—"

"Yes or no to the grapes?"

"Yes. No. I mean, yes, we have no—"

"So in effect, I'm asking the King of the Immortals, God of Jus-

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tice, God of Honour, God of Faith, who shakes his black goatskin cloak to marshal up the storm clouds and who controls the weather, good and bad, to very kindly *not* drop a thunderbolt over my Etruscan vineyards, even though I haven't bothered to propitiate him this year?"

The steward's Adam's apple jiggled up and down as his long, thin face crumpled like a piece of used papyrus. "That does appear to pretty much sum up the current situation, madam."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" Claudia resumed her pacing of the atrium, wafting her fan so hard that a couple of the feathers sprang loose from their clip. Dear Diana, it was hot. Small wonder that half of Rome had taken itself off to the cool of the country or else to the seaside for the month of August. She thought of the refreshing coastal breezes. A dip in the warm, translucent ocean. The sound of cooling waves crashing against rocks . . . "Well, let me tell you something, Leonides. That doesn't sum up even *half* the current situation."

Marilyn Todd's eighth Claudia Seferius novel, *Dark Horse,* was published by Severn House in the U.K. in October of 2002, and received a strong review in *PW*. Claudia also continues to solve crimes at short story length, while managing to avoid romantic entanglement with her nemesis, Marcus Cornelius Orbilio. "I enjoy writing these Claudia stories so much, it almost feels like I'm indulging in a guilty liaison," Ms. Todd confessed to *EQMM*. †

According to the astrologers and soothsayers in the Forum—at least those diehards who hadn't fled this vile, stinking heat—terrible storms were in the offing unless almighty Jupiter could be appeased. For everyone else in the Empire, storms would be a relief from this torpid, enervating swelter. Sweat soaked workmen's tunics and plastered their hair to their foreheads. Meat turned within the day, and fish was best avoided unless it was flapping. Even Old Man Tiber couldn't escape. His waters ran yellow and sluggish, stinking to high heaven from refuse, sewage, and the carcasses of rotting sheep. But for farmers with grapes still ripening out on the vine, storms on the scale that were being predicted provoked only fear. A single hailstorm could wipe out their entire vintage.

"Prayers and libations aren't enough," Claudia said, as two more feathers flew out of the fan, "and I can hardly buy grapes from the market and palm them off to Jupiter as my own."

It was enough that that bitch Fortune happened to be unwavering when it came to divine retribution at the moment. Claudia didn't want it spreading round Mount Olympus like a plague.

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"And you're forgetting, Leonides, that I can't despatch a slave to Etruria to cut bunches until tomorrow at the earliest, because today, dammit, is the Festival of Diana—which just happens to be a holiday for slaves!"

"Oh, I hadn't forgotten," Leonides replied mournfully.

Claudia blew a feather off the end of her nose and thought at this rate, the wretched fan would be bald by nightfall, and why the devil can't people make things to last anymore, surely that isn't too much to ask. She stopped. Turned. Stared at her steward.

"Very well, Leonides, you may go."

He was the only one left, anyway, apart from her Gaulish bodyguard, and it would take an earthquake, followed by a tidal wave, followed by every demon charging out of Hades before Junius relinquished his post. She glanced across to where he was standing, feet apart, arms folded across his iron chest, in the doorway to the vestibule, and couldn't for the life of her imagine why he wasn't out there lavishing his hard-earned sesterces on garlands, girls, and gaming tables like the rest of the men in her household.

The girls, of course, had better things to do. Dating back to some archaic ritual of washing hair, presumably in the days before fresh water had been piped into the city by a network of aqueducts, the Festival of Diana was now just a wonderful excuse for slave women to gather in the precinct of the goddess's temple on the Aventine. There, continuing the theme of this ancient tradition, they would spend the day pinning one another's hair in elaborate curls and experimenting with pins and coloured ribbons. Any other time and Claudia would have been down there, too, watching dexterous fingers knotting, twisting, coiling, plaiting, because at least half a dozen innovative styles came out of this feast day on the ides of August, and all too fast the shadows on the sundial on the temple wall would pass.

But not today. Today she had received the news that her bailiff was covered in spots and that rather than risk the harvest by having the workforce fall sick, he had put them in quarantine to the point where no one was even available to pick a dozen clusters of grapes. There was a grinding sound coming from somewhere. After a while, she realised it was her teeth.

"Junius?"

Before she'd even finished calling his name, he'd crossed the hall in three long strides. Was any bodyguard more dedicated, she wondered? Sometimes, catching sight of his piercing blue gaze trained upon her, she found his devotion to duty somewhat puzzling. Any other chap and you'd think he carried a torch for her, but hell, he was only twenty-one, while she was twenty-five, a widow at that, and tell me, what young stallion goes lusting after mares when he can have his pick of fillies?

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Widow. Yes.

With all the excitement, she'd almost forgotten poor Gaius. Yet the whole point of marrying someone older, fatter, and in the terminal stages of halitosis was for these vineyards, wasn't it? Well, not the vineyards exactly. She had married Gaius for what they'd been worth, although the bargain wasn't one-sided. Gaius Seferius had had what he wanted, as well—a beautiful, witty trophy wife, and one who was less than half his age at that. Both sides had been content with the arrangement, knowing that by the time he finally broke through the ribbon of life's finishing line, Gaius would be leaving his lovely widow in a very comfortable position. In practice, it worked out better than Claudia had hoped.

Maybe not for Gaius, who had been summoned across the River Styx a tad earlier than he'd expected, and certainly before he would have wished.

And maybe not for his family, either, who were written out of his will.

But for Claudia, who'd inherited everything from the spread of Etruscan vineyards to numerous investments in commercial enterprises, from this fabulous house with its wealth of marbles and mosaics, right down to the contents of his bursting treasure chests, life could not have turned out sweeter if she'd planned it. So why, then, hadn't she simply sold up and walked away? It was how she'd envisaged her future after Gaius. No responsibilities. Draw a line. Start again. Instead, she hadn't just hung on to the wine business, she'd taken an active, some might say principal, role. And as for his grasping, two-faced family, goodness knows why she continued to support them! Something to do with not wanting them to root around in her past, she supposed, but that was not the point.

The point was, she must remember to lay some flowers beside her husband's tomb sometime. And maybe she'd have his bust repainted this year, too. After all, it couldn't exactly be improving down there in the cellar.

"Junius, I want you to run down to the Forum and hire a messenger. The ones by the basilica are usually reliable, but if there's no one left today, and I'll be very surprised if there is, given that it's a holiday for slaves, try the place behind the Records Office."

"Me?" The Gaul was shocked. "B-but I can't possibly leave you here alone, madam."

"I promise that if a gang of murdering marauders come barging in, I'll ask them to wait until you're back to protect my honour, and that way we can both get killed. How's that?"

"With respect," his freckled face had darkened to a worried purple, "I don't consider danger a joking matter. These are the dog days of summer. Men are driven mad by the appalling heat,

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madam, and by the sickness and disease that grips the city. With rich folk decamped to the country, only criminals and undertakers flourish in Rome at the moment."

Claudia nodded. "Very eloquently put, Junius. You are, of course, absolutely correct, and if you don't hurry, there won't be any messengers at the place behind the Records Office, either."

"But, madam—"

"It's a straight choice, Junius. Either you hire a courier to gallop like the wind to my estate, pick a dozen bunches of the ripest grapes, then ride straight back, where we might—just might—make it in the five days we have left and therefore save the day. Or I turn you into cash at the slave auction in the Forum in the morning."

The young Gaul drew himself up to his full height, squared his impressive shoulders, and clicked his heels together. "In that case, madam." This time he didn't look at her, but stared straight ahead. "In that case, I see I have no alternative."

Excellent. Using the full services of the post houses and changing stations, the messenger—

"You will have to sell me in the morning."

What? The remaining feathers sprayed out of the fan as Claudia crushed it in her fist. "This is not a debatable issue, Junius. You will—"

"I am not leaving you alone and that's final."

Jupiter, Juno, and Mars, that's all I need. The only slave left on the entire premises turns out to be as stubborn as a stable full of mules! She looked at the rigid line to his mouth, the square set to his chin, and resisted the urge to punch him on it. Remind me of the position again?

A storm threatens to wipe out this year's harvest.

The offering to propitiate the god who threatens that storm isn't coming.

There's no one available to go and fetch it.

And the only person who *could* help is throwing tantrums.

In short, if she wanted a courier, Claudia would have to trek out in this ghastly, fly-blown, disease-ridden heat and hire one herself, a role her bodyguard would be very happy for her to undertake, because at least he could be on hand when robbers, thieves, and rapists set upon them.

Was there, she wondered, anything else which that bitch Fortune could throw in her path today?

The goddess's reply came almost at once.

She delivered it in the form of a bloodcurdling scream.

Which came from Claudia's very own garden.

With its stately marble statues and rearing bronze horses, Claudia's garden was a testament to her late husband's wealth and

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social status. A red-tiled portico provided shade and offered shelter from the rain, the water from its terra cotta gutters collected in oak butts to irrigate the vast array of herbs and flowers, whose scent in turn fragranced the air throughout the year. Paved paths crisscrossed through clipped lavender and rosemary, while topiaried laurels and standard bay trees gave the garden depth and height. In the centre, a pool half covered by the thick, white, waxy blooms of water lilies reflected sunshine, clouds, or stars, according to the weather. And all around, fountains splashed and chattered, making prisms as they danced, as well as an attractive proposition for birds in need of something more refreshing than a dust bath.

That such a place of beauty and tranquillity could be shattered by such a scream was nothing short of outrage.

The instant they had heard it, Claudia and her bodyguard went flying down the atrium. From then, it was as though the sequence of events had been frozen. Time slowed. She might have been watching them unfold by following their progress on a carved relief.

The screech came from a young man scrambling down the fig tree which grew against the wall. Unlike her villa in the country—indeed, unlike everybody's villa in the country—this house didn't have the room to follow the traditional pattern of four single-storey wings around a central courtyard. For a start, it had two upper galleries for bedchambers and linen storage, each accessed by separate staircases, and a cellar which was accessed by steps outside the kitchens. The only possible site for a garden was behind the house and adjacent to its neighbour's. With one million people crammed into the city, space was at a premium and houses, even those of the wealthy, invariably butted up against each other. Claudia's was no exception. To the right, she adjoined the house of a Syrian glass merchant, while her garden at the rear adjoined a general's. Paulus Salvius Volso, to be precise. Admittedly a loud-mouthed, drunken bully of a man, but all the same it was from his premises that the youth was making his rather hurried exit.

What he'd been up to in the general's house was clear from the array of golden goblets and silver platters which bulged out of the sack slung over his left shoulder. The contents nearly blinded her when the sunlight caught them. He was halfway down the fig when he let loose a second shriek.

It took a moment before Claudia realised that they were not screams of alarm, but squeals of wild abandon. The grin on his face as he jumped down was as wide as a barn.

"Hey!" Junius called out. "Hey, you! Stop right there!"

The boy spun round in surprise, but didn't falter as he bolted towards the wicker gate on the far side of the garden.

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"Stop!" This was a different voice. A soldier's bark. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

Junius was already racing down the path to try and cut the thief off, so he didn't bother looking round to see who was shouting from the top of her neighbour's wall. Claudia did. It was Labeo, one of the general's henchmen and a retired captain of archers. The thief had used a ladder to make good his escape. His mistake lay in not kicking it away. Labeo had shinned up it like a monkey.

The boy shot a quick glance at the bodyguard charging down the path towards him. Halfway to the gate, he knew he could outsprint him. Claudia knew it, too, and so did Labeo. On a public holiday, the street outside would be heaving. One more thief lost in a crowd.

"Last chance," Labeo boomed. "Or I'll fire."

Claudia saw the grin drop from the boy's face. Realised that he hadn't actually seen Labeo until now. Thought it was a bluff being called by someone from inside Claudia's house, not from the top of the wall.

He turned. Saw the archer. Dropped the sack.

"All right, all right," he yelled. "Have it!"

Gold, bronze, copper, and silver spilled over the pinks and the lilies. Ivory figurines knocked the heads off the roses.

What happened next would stay with Claudia for the rest of her life.

Watching the cascade of precious artifacts, she first saw its reflection in the pool. An arc of white, flying left to right.

Heard a soft hiss.

Looked up.

The arrow hit the boy in the centre of his back. She heard the splinter of bone. The soft yelp that sprang from his lips.

For three paces he didn't stop running. Then his arms splayed. His legs buckled. Red froth burst from his mouth. Still he kept going. It was only when he reached the gate and tried to unbar it that he realised he couldn't make it. Junius had caught up by now. Was cradling the boy in his lap. Claudia could hear him whispering words of comfort as she flew to his side.

"Shh, lad." Junius wiped the fringe from the boy's face and patted his cheek. "It's all right. There's a physician on his way now."

His expression was haunted as it met Claudia's unvoiced question.

"You d-don't understand." The boy's head rolled wildly and his breath bubbled red. "N-not s-supposed to b-be like this." Terrified eyes bored into Claudia's. She could see that they were brown. Brown as an otter. "I'm n-not going to d-die, am I?" he asked.

"Of course not," she said, only there was something wrong with her eyes, because her vision was misty. "It's just a wound, like

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Junius says." Her voice was cracked, too. "You'll be back on your feet in a week."

But that wasn't quite true.

The otter was already swimming the Styx.

For his part, Labeo had no sympathy for what he termed a dead piece of scum. Indeed, he would have pulled the arrow out of the boy's back to see how the head had compacted upon impact, had he not been prevented by Mistress Snooty from next-door here, slapping his hand away. What a bitch, he thought. Shooting me glares which would poleaxe a lesser man. What did she expect me to do? Let the thieving toe-rag go?

"The general's instructions was to shoot all intruders, whether they be on the premises or in the process of escaping," he informed her. "And it don't matter to me whether this piece of filth were carrying a dagger or not," he added coldly when taken to task about killing an unarmed, defenceless fifteen-year-old boy. "He were guilty, and the proof, if it's necessary, lies all over your flower beds. Ma'am."

He weren't accountable to her anyway. The bitch.

But dammit, the sulky cow just would not let it rest. On and on she went, about how young the boy was, and hadn't anyone considered what had driven the poor lad to resort to stealing, because you could see he wasn't used to it, no one in their right mind would run off up a busy street with a sack stuffed full of golden objects and not have the army after them, and anyway what seasoned professional would go round leaving ladders against walls to make life easy for his pursuers?

Labeo let it ride. If she wanted to feel sorry for that little turd, that was her business, not his. He'd done the job he was being paid to do, and he was behind the general all the way on this. Let criminals think you're a soft touch, and every bloody thief will be climbing up the balcony! So while she ranted, he congratulated himself on being such a damn good shot. That arrow went exactly where he'd planned it.

Quite at what point Her Snootyship intended to shut up, Labeo didn't know. But he was mighty glad when he heard the general call his name from the far side of the wall. The master hadn't been expected back for ages, but wouldn't he be pleased to hear his captain had bagged a sewer rat this morning!

Except there were something different about the general's bellow. Every bit as terse. Nothing unusual about that! And no less urgent, neither. (The general weren't a patient man!) But . . . Well, it just sounded different, that was all.

"I'm over here, General," he called back. "Caught a burglar stealing your gold. Shot him as he escaped."

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"Is he dead?" Volso wanted to know, scaling the ladder two steps at a time. He was a tall man in maybe his forty-second summer, broad of shoulder and square of jaw, his skin weathered from years of campaigning and thickened from too many nights cradling the wine jar. But he cut a commanding enough figure on and off the field, and regular training in the gymnasium had clearly paid off. It was a lean and nimble figure that swung itself over the adjoining wall.

"Couldn't be deader," Labeo told him proudly, as his employer dropped to the ground.

"Pity," Volso snarled, wiping the dirt from his hands down his tunic. He marched over to where Junius and Claudia were conversing quietly over the body and rammed his foot hard into the corpse. "Bastard didn't deserve an easy death."

"Volso!" Horrified, Claudia stepped in front before he could land a second kick. "You are on my property, General, and I'll thank you to have some respect for it, for me, and for the dead."

"Respect?" Labeo feared the general's bellow would deafen the widow. *"Respect, you say?"* He pushed her roughly aside and slammed his boot into the boy's side as he had originally intended. "Save your sympathy, Claudia Seferius. If Labeo hadn't killed him, public execution certainly would."

"Stealing is a civil matter—" she began.

"Stealing is," the general agreed. "Murder isn't. That boy you're so protective of didn't just rob me of my gold and silver. He robbed me of my wife." Volso turned to face his archer. "Callista's body is still sprawled across the bedroom floor," he said quietly. "Where this bastard strangled her."

Moonlight had turned the garden paths to silver. The feathery leaves of artemisia and the pale purple flowers of sweet rocket released musky perfume into heat that pulsated like a cricket, and mice rustled beneath the fan-trained peach trees, pears, and apricots. Bats squeaked on the wing in search of moths. An owl hooted from the cedar three doors down, and a frog plopped gently into the pool from a water-lily leaf.

The slaves were not back yet. While they milked their precious holiday for all it was worth, there was none of the customary clattering of pots and skillets from the kitchens. No bickering coming out of the married quarters. The heather brooms and garden shears were silent. Everything was silent.

Seated on a white marble bench with her back against an apple tree, Claudia watched her blue-eyed, cross-eyed, dark Egyptian cat chase a mouse round the shrine in the corner of the garden and slowly sipped her wine. The wine was dark. Dark as Claudia's mood. And every bit as heavy. Cradling the green glass goblet in

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both hands, she stared up at the night sky without blinking. The stars would make life easy for navigation out at sea tonight, she thought. Directly overhead, the dragon roared and Hercules strode purposefully across the heavens, wielding his olive-wood club. How appropriate, she mused, that it was the constellation of Sagittarius which was starting to rise over the southern horizon. Sagittarius, the Archer . . .

The army had come, conducted its investigation in the twinkling of an eye, and departed hours ago. The young man's body had been carted away unceremoniously on a stretcher and Labeo had been lauded for a job well done, both by the army and his bereaved employer. It had been left to Claudia and her bodyguard to stack the stolen objects back inside the sack, in which Junius later returned them to their owner.

Still staring at the stars, she sipped her wine.

"So then." A tall, patrician body eased itself onto the bench, leaned its back against the rough bark of the apple tree, and crossed its long patrician legs at its booted ankles. "Cut and dried."

Even above the scents of the junipers and cypress, the heliotrope and the lilies, she could smell his spicy sandalwood unguent. Caught a faint whiff of the rosemary in which his trademark long linen tunic had been rinsed.

"I wondered how long it would take before Marcus Cornelius Orbilio arrived on the scene," she said without turning her head.

Up there on Olympus, Fortune must be wetting her knickers. Claudia topped up her goblet from the jar. Dammit, she couldn't make a move without the Security Police popping up in the form of their only aristocratic investigator, who seemed to view her—let's call them misdemeanours—as his fast track to the Senate. Still. What did she care? She had nothing to hide from him this time. For once, Marcus Make-Room-for-Me-in-the-Assembly Orbilio was whistling in the dark.

She couldn't see him, but knew that he was grinning. "Why?" he asked. "Were you running a book on when I'd arrive?"

"*Tch, tch, tch.* You should know that gambling's against the law, Orbilio."

"Which happens to be one of the reasons I've called round." A shower of bronze betting receipts scattered on the path. "Yours, I believe."

"Never seen them before in my life," she replied. Bugger. That was the best boxer in Rome she'd backed with those. Half a brickwork's worth, if she recalled.

"What about these?" he said, showering a dozen more.

And that, unless she missed her guess, was the other half,

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invested at five to one on a Scythian wrestler from the north coast of the Black Sea. Bugger, bugger, bugger.

"We caught the bookie touting outside the imperial palace," he said cheerfully. "You know, you really should be more careful who you have dealings with, Claudia."

She skewered him with a glare. "Damn right."

"How much of Gaius's money do you have left?" he asked.

The old adage was true, she thought ruefully. The best way to make a small fortune is to start with a large one. . . .

"Jupiter alone knows what will happen to the family fortune once I'm married to you," he continued smoothly. "We'll probably be celebrating our fifth anniversary in the gutter."

She supposed it was the moon making twinkles in his eyes, but in its clear, three-quarters light she could see every curl in his thick mop of hair, the solid musculature of his chest, the crisp, dark hairs on the back of his forearms.

"I would go to the lions before I went to the altar with you, Marcus Cornelius, and if you've finished littering my garden path, perhaps you'll be kind enough to sod off. I have a pressing engagement." She patted the wine jar beside her. "With my friend Bacchus here."

"Hmm." He folded his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. "You seem to be having a lot of metal littering your garden path all of a sudden. Tell me about this morning."

"No."

Why the hell did he think she wanted to get drunk? To forget, that was why. To forget a young man with an ecstatic grin and eyes as brown as an otter. Eyes that she had watched glaze in death. . . .

"Oh no. There's more to it than that," he said, clicking his tongue. "I know you inside out." He recrossed his ankles, but did not open his eyes. "Tell me."

"If I did, you wouldn't believe me."

"I don't believe you've never seen these betting receipts. I don't believe you've never defrauded your customers, or that you've never smuggled your wine out of Rome to avoid paying taxes, and that's why I love you, my darling, and that's why I know that when you marry me, life will never be dull—"

"See a physician, you have a fever."

"—and I know, equally, that I'll never be able to trust you with money or business, but I do trust your judgment, Claudia Seferius. What is it about this morning that bothers you?"

"You really want to know?" Claudia drew a deep breath. Stared up at the celestial Archer. Let her breath out slowly to a count of five. "What bothers me, Orbilio, is that a woman was murdered today and the wrong man took the blame. A young man who, conveniently, is not around to tell his side of the story."

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"You think Labeo—"

Claudia snorted. "That arrogant oaf?" In her mind, she heard again the sickening thud as the general's boot thudded into the dead boy's ribs. Heard the youth's exuberant yell as he scrambled down the fig tree on the wall.

"No, Marcus," she said wearily, "Labeo did not kill Callista." She thought of her tiny, fair-haired neighbour laid out on her funeral bier in the atrium next-door, cypress at the door, torches burning at her feet. "The thing is, Volso is a domineering drunk and a bully." She sighed. "Who liked to beat his wife and his children."

Juno in heaven, how often had she heard them? The muffled screams. The pleading. Wracking sobs that lasted well into the night . . . Many times she would rush round there, only for the door to be slammed in her face, and the next day Callista's story would be the same. The children had fallen downstairs, she'd say, or she had walked into a pillar. Sweet Janus, how often had Claudia begged her to leave the vicious brute? One day, she'd told Callista, he will end up killing one of the children.

"Think of them, if not yourself," she'd advised.

Months passed and nothing changed, until, miracle of miracles, last week Callista called round to confide that she was leaving. Enough was enough, she'd said. Claudia was right. One of these days she feared Volso *would* go too far and as soon as she'd found suitable accommodation for herself and the children, she would pack her bags and leave.

"So you think Volso killed his wife?" Marcus said.

"No," Claudia replied sadly, "I killed her."

She could easily have taken Callista and the children in, but she had not. She'd been too busy trotting round placing bets on boxers and wrestlers, ordering new gowns for the Vinalia in six days' time, planning parties, organising dinners, garlanding the hall with floral tributes. A battered wife with moping children would have got in the way. Put a dampener on everybody's spirits.

As surely as Paulus Salvius Volso throttled the life out of poor Callista, so Claudia Seferius had provided him with the ammunition.

Orbilio was forced to admit that when Claudia told him he wouldn't believe what she was going to tell him, he was wrong. He'd said he was convinced that he'd believe her. But wrong he was.

That Volso killed his wife he could accept. The minute he'd heard that Callista had been found strangled in the course of a burglary, his suspicions were aroused. Having listened to the report of the centurion sent to investigate the killing of the thief, he'd not been at all satisfied with the army's neat conclusion. Volso's reputation preceded him and Marcus knew him as the type who vehemently believed that his wife and children were his prop-

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erty, that he would say who came and who went, and that nobody, but nobody, left him unless *he* threw them out. That was why he'd called on Claudia this evening. To hear her view on the matter.

But that she was in any way morally responsible was bullshit.

In time, of course, she would come to see this for herself, and surely the best way of helping her to reach this point was for her to help him clap the cold-blooded bastard in irons.

"The killing required a lot of planning," he said.

And together, as the Archer rose and the level in the wine jug sank, they gradually pieced together the sequence of events.

First, Callista, having made her decision, must have somehow given the game away. Perhaps she had started to put things together in a chest. Maybe she'd confided to one of the older children. Who knows? Hell, she might even have lodged her claim in a divorce court, where Volso was just powerful enough to have the scribe report the matter back. Either way, he knew about her plan but did not let on.

Instead, he went out and hired himself a thief. A military man, he'd know exactly where to look and, as a commander of long standing, he would know what type of character to choose. Someone gullible, for a start. Someone who would believe the story he had spun them about having fallen on hard times and how the debt collectors would be knocking at his door any day now to seize his assets. But if he could beat them at their own game . . . ? Stage a burglary whereby the thief was paid handsomely to steal the goods, which he would hand over to the general's henchman outside in the street to be converted into liquid assets which the debt collectors would not know about.

"How do you know he'd told the boy there would be an accomplice?" Orbilio asked.

"The yells," she explained. "The yells were to alert the person he believed would be loitering in the street to move up to my back gate in readiness to relieve him of the sack and pay him whatever price Volso had agreed." She shrugged. "As I said, it had to be somebody gullible."

Older boys would not have swallowed the bait. This boy had to be new at the game. No one else would have been told to leave the ladder up against the wall and actually left it!

"Except his yells alerted Labeo instead," Marcus said. "Who had been primed beforehand by his master that on a slaves' holiday the house might well be a target for thieves and that he was to shoot on sight."

Perhaps it wasn't Labeo's fault after all, Claudia mused. He'd been as much a pawn in the game as the boy, the one lured by greed, the other by pride. The only difference, Labeo was alive.

"So." Orbilio steepled his fingers. "The house is empty, because

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all the slaves are out celebrating. It's just Labeo in there on his own, and Callista, whom Volso had undoubtedly drugged. The boy sneaks in, probably through your garden, shins up the fig tree and over the wall. He then places the ladder so he can make his escape. Inside, he fills the sack with the items he's been instructed to pick and then, when he's finished, he screams like a banshee, because it's vital the accomplice is outside for a quick handover."

"Unfortunately, the yell alerts Labeo, who finds no trouble chasing him, thanks to the ladder Volso thought to set in place." Claudia could see why he'd made general. In military tactics, timing is crucial. "Because while we're all nicely diverted by the robbery and the killing of the thief, the master of the house is free to walk in through his own front door and throttle his wife at his leisure."

"Ah." Orbilio plucked a blade of grass and chewed it. "That's where it starts to get tricky. You see, Volso refused point-blank to give his porter the day off today, and the porter is adamant his master left the house shortly after dawn and did not come back until *after* the boy had been shot. He knows this, because when Volso came home the porter told him about the robbery and he was actually with him when he found Callista's body."

He paused. Cracked his knuckles. Spiked his hands through his hair in frustration.

"Therefore, Volso could not have killed his wife."

Dawn was painting the sky a dusky heather pink when Claudia finally stood up. The first blackbird had started to sing from the cherry tree, mice made last-minute searches for beetles, and frogs began to croak from the margins of the lily pond. She shook the creases from her pale blue linen gown, smoothed pleats which had wilted in the heat, and forced half a dozen wayward ringlets back into their ivory comb.

The first of the slaves had begun to trickle home three hours ago. Gradually, the rest had staggered in, singing, belching, giggling under their breath, their footsteps and their voices restoring order to the silent house. Without their presence, it was as though the bricks and mortar had been in hibernation. Now it was a home again, for them as well as Claudia, the rafters resonating with their drunken squabbles and their laughter, the clang of a kicked pan here, the spluttered expletive from a banged shin there, the bawling of too many overtired children.

For most of the night, she and Orbilio had sat in silence in the moonlight, trying to figure out how Volso could have done it. Twice Marcus got up to fill the wine jar and fetch cheese, dates, and small cakes made from candied fruit, spices, and honey to help mop it up, but now, as dawn poked her head above the covers of the eastern horizon, the security policeman admitted defeat.

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"He's got away with it, hasn't he?" he said, yawning. There was a shadow of stubble around his chin, she noticed. And lines round his eyes which didn't come from lack of sleep. "The cold, conniving bastard is going to walk."

Claudia stretched. Massaged the back of her neck. And smiled.

"You fetch the army and arrest him," she said. "I'll give you the proof."

She glanced across at the garden wall, then back at her own house. *Gotcha, you son of a bitch.*

It started in the garden, it was fitting that it should end there, she supposed. By the time half a dozen legionaries came clunking in, their greaves and breastplates shining in the sun, Claudia had changed into a gown of the palest turquoise blue and was seated in the shade of the portico beside the fountain, taking breakfast. In her hand was a letter from her bailiff and the news was good. The spots were not contagious, he had written. According to the estate's horse doctor, they were the result of eating tunnyfish. The grapes for Jupiter were on their way.

She should bloody well hope so, too. Caught up in the tragedy of yesterday, she had quite forgotten about sending a courier to fetch them, and maybe she'd call in at Fortune's temple in the Cattle Market later to drop off a trinket or two. Fickle bitch, but not so bad when you boiled it down.

"You'll pay for this!" Volso thundered as the soldiers dragged him down the path. "By Hades, I'll have you in court for slander, Claudia Seferius, and I'll take every penny that you own in damages. This house. The vineyards. I'll have the bloody lot. You'll be so poor, you won't be able to afford the sewage from my gutter."

"Save it for the lions, Volso." She bit into a peach, and the juice dribbled down her chin. "You planned Callista's murder like a military campaign and thought you'd get away with it." She mopped the juice up with a cloth. "Only there were three people you underestimated."

"Come on," he taunted, his square face dark with rage. "Let's hear this crackpot theory, you bitch, because believe me, it will make for interesting evidence at your slander trial."

Behind the group, she watched Marcus Cornelius let the bronze statue of a horse absorb his weight. He hadn't had time to change his tunic, yet she swore that, above the smell of soldiers' sweat, the leathery scent emanating from Volso, and the pungent perfumes of the herbs in the flower beds—basil, thyme, and marjoram—she could detect a hint of sandalwood. An expression had settled on his face as he watched her which with anyone else, she would have interpreted as pride.

"Firstly, Volso, you underestimated the boy. He was young, keen,

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gullible, vulnerable, in fact, all the things you'd wanted him to be, and that was the problem. He was *too* young, *too* keen, *too* gullible."

He ought to have picked someone who was greedy, not needy. The screams gave it away. Yes, he'd yelled as he'd been instructed. But the shrieks he'd let out were wild and exuberant. Whoops of pure joy. *I've done it,* they'd said. *I've got away with the stash, the accomplice is outside, I am going to be RICH!* She remembered the grin as wide as a barn. The dancing light of triumph in his eyes. That was not the expression of a thief who'd just strangled a woman in a burglary that had gone horribly wrong.

"Secondly, you underestimated my steward."

Volso might run a tight ship next door, checking up for specks of dust and fingerprints on statues, taking the whip to his wife and his slaves if he found so much as one thing out of order. What he'd overlooked is that not everyone gets off on that level of control. It might work on the battlefield, but Claudia's slaves wouldn't know what a whip looked like, for gods' sake, and Leonides wasn't the type of steward to have his crew running around doing unnecessary tasks. The cellar was cleaned thoroughly, but only twice a year, and that was twice as often as any public temple.

She turned to Orbilio. "Did you find any of the substances I listed?"

"Oh yes. We found traces of them on his boots and tunic from where he'd bumbled around your cellar in the dark while he counted out the timing. Flour from the grinding wheel, cinnamon where it had spilled out from the sack, a vinegar stain, a smear of pitch, the corporal has the full list."

"You planted that, you bastard," Volso snarled.

"We didn't plant your boot prints in the dust," Marcus retorted. "The impression from a shoe is almost nonexistent unless there's a body inside to make tracks."

But the general wasn't going down without a fight. "The fact that I was in the cellar proves nothing. In fact, I remember now. Two or three days ago, I called round to borrow some charcoals, ours had run out."

Even the legionaries couldn't stop sniggering. Paulus Salvius Volso running next-door to borrow some coals? Jupiter would turn celibate first!

Volso turned back to Claudia. "And the third person I'm supposed to have underestimated? That's you, I imagine?"

"Good heavens, no." Claudia shot him a radiant smile. "My dear Volso, that was your wife."

Apart from the fact that frogs would grow wings before Volso came back early to check on his wife who had not been feeling well, had he not left Callista's body sprawled on the bedroom floor, he might still have talked his way out of it. But what devoted husband wouldn't have lifted the remains of his beloved onto the bed?

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Only a callous bastard of the highest order could think of leaving her in an ignominious and distorted heap for people to gawp at.

In death, Callista had had the last word after all.

The legionaries were gone, their prisoner with them. The tranquillity of the garden had returned, and there was no indication among the rose arbours and herbiaries of the tragedy that had taken place here. Not just one death, either, but three. Callista's. The boy's. And Volso's to come in the arena.

He had planned the two murders like a military campaign. Coldly and ruthlessly, he chose the day when slaves everywhere, not just his own, would be out. No doubt he'd expected his neighbour to be out, too, as she usually was on the Festival of Diana, but it wouldn't matter unduly.

He would climb into Claudia's garden using the ladder, then kick it away after him. He would hide in the cellar, biding his time until he heard screams, and then whoever *might* have been in the house would certainly rush outside. He would give it a count of twenty before leaving the cellar, but then comes the daring part. He actually walks across the garden while everyone is clustered round the thief's body! If challenged, of course, he can bluff it out by claiming he'd heard a scream as he was returning home and came to help. Then he would just nip over the garden wall to "check on his wife," only to report back that she was dead.

As it happened, no one saw him. Up and over, throttle the missus, up and back again in no time—before calmly letting himself out of Claudia's house and sauntering up to his own, whistling without a care in the world as the porter had testified.

And now they were gone. All of them. Volso. Callista. The otter.

"Do you think we'll ever know his name?" she asked Marcus.

In reply, he pursed his lips and shrugged. "I doubt it," he said. Urchins like him disappeared by the dozen every day. It was the unseen tragedy of the big city and so-called civilisation.

Across the garden, a chink of gold reflected from beneath the mint. A small child's goblet with a double handle. And so the tragedy goes on, she thought. . . .

She looked up into his eyes. Resisted the urge to brush that stupid fringe from where it had fallen down over his face and trace her finger down the worry lines round his eyes.

"I was here," she said, "when I saw the reflection of the arrow in the pool."

There was a pause. *"Here?"* he echoed, frowning.

"Right here." She pointed to the spot with a determined finger. Sweet Jupiter in heaven, she would never forget it. "White as snow, I actually watched it arc through the air."

Orbilio scratched his ear. "Not from here, you didn't," he replied.

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"If Labeo was standing on the ladder and the boy was near the gate, and if he kept on running like you said after he'd been hit, then the arrow travelled like so."

He indicated the trajectory of the missile with his hand.

"As you can see, the path doesn't curve as you describe it. Also, the arrow wasn't white, it's almost black. What's more, if it was travelling at the speed, angle, and direction that you say, it would be you who was lying dead, not your little otter. Oh, and by the way, did I ever tell you that you're stunning when you're angry and you're stunning when you're not, and that you're even more stunning when you're breaking generals' balls? I think a spring wedding would be rather fun, don't you?"

"I'd marry an arena-full of Volsos before I married you," she said, "but what I don't understand is this. If it wasn't Labeo's arrow that I saw reflected in the pool, what was it?"

Orbilio thought of the suffocating heat that played strange tricks by bending light. He thought of the emotion of the moment, the reflection of a white dove overhead; in fact, he could think of any number of rational explanations. But then . . . But then . . . There was also the matter of a certain mischievous little cherub by the name of Cupid. So he said nothing.

He just pulled Claudia Seferius into his arms and kissed her. ●

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Art by Ron Buccalo

SLAYER STATUTE

by Janet Dawson

"Why would one shoot the other?" I asked. I like to know why things happen.

Wilcoxin shrugged. "Don't know, don't care. They're both dead. All I care about is who gets the money." He frowned, as though considering how callous that sounded. "That's for damn sure all the beneficiaries care about."

"How much money?"

The insurance adjuster gazed morosely at the folder sitting like a toad in the middle of his desk. He named an amount certain to gladden the heart of any beneficiary, then appended a caveat.

"Payment to the beneficiaries is my top priority, but I want to be sure the insurance company hasn't been defrauded. That's where you come in, Ms. Howard. You were recommended to me as someone who can untangle messes. This case has been a monumental headache."

I wasn't sure I wanted to jump into this briar patch. "Tell me more. Then I'll tell you if I'll take it."

Judging from the look on his face, the thought that I might not

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be willing to take on his headache evidently hadn't occurred to Wilcoxin. He reached for the file, which concerned a husband and wife, both of them very dead. In fact, one of them had apparently committed homicide before committing suicide. Why? That was just one of the questions I had about the late Claude and Martha Terrell.

Late fifties, both of them. Late residents of Alameda, the island city in San Francisco Bay. They'd both been in real estate. Claude developed commercial, Martha sold residential. Having made piles of money, they both retired. Claude played golf, Martha played bridge—when she wasn't collecting old silver.

Janet Dawson is the author of nine novels featuring Oakland P.I. Jeri Howard, including *Kindred Crimes,* which won the St. Martin's Press/P.I. Writers of America contest for best first P.I. novel in 1991. Jeri has also appeared in several short stories, published in various anthologies. A collection of these tales, entitled *Scam and Eggs* (Five Star), was released in December, 2002. Ms. Dawson's work has never before appeared in *EQMM.* ✝

The Terrells had married eight years earlier, a second marriage for both, after their first matrimonial forays ended in divorce. Each had two adult children. Claude's son Eric was thirty-one and married. Daughter Erin was twenty-nine and single. Martha's daughter Pamela was thirty, married, with one child. Son Colin was twenty-seven and unmarried.

Not long after their wedding, the Terrells had purchased life-insurance policies with Wilcoxin's company. The policies had included the standard suicide clause, designed to discourage people from promptly killing themselves to benefit their families. The clause stated that if the insured committed suicide within two years after the policy issue date, the insurance company's liability was limited to a return of the premiums paid. The suicide clause on the Terrell policy was no longer in effect. The insurer was now obligated to pay the beneficiaries, whom the Terrells had designated in what should have been a straightforward, logical fashion.

Should have been, that is, until words like homicide entered the equation.

"You're familiar with the Slayer Statute?" Wilcoxin asked.

"California Probate Code Section 250? Indeed I am."

"The medical examiner can't say who died first. The police can't figure out which one killed the other. You see my problem?"

"Indeed I do." And it was a doozy.

The California Slayer Statute says that a person who "feloniously and intentionally kills the decedent" is not entitled to any

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of the decedent's property, interest, or benefit, which then goes to the heirs "as if the killer had predeceased the decedent."

So what did the Slayer Statute have to do with the Terrells' life insurance policies? Everything.

Under normal circumstances, if Claude died first, the money from his insurance policy went to his primary beneficiary, Martha. If Martha was no longer living at the time Claude died, the payout went to his secondary beneficiaries, Claude's two children, Eric and Erin. If Martha died first, the money from her insurance policy went to her primary beneficiary, Claude. If he was no longer living when Martha died, the payout went to Martha's secondary beneficiaries, her children, Pamela and Colin, then to her tertiary beneficiary, Pamela's young daughter.

But if the deaths were murder-suicide, normal went out the window. The law assumed the killer died first. So when it came to distributing the estate, the scenario went like this:

If Claude killed Martha, then turned the gun on himself, the law figured Claude died first and Martha was his beneficiary. Since Martha was also dead, her beneficiaries would get the money from Claude's life insurance policy—plus the payout from Martha's life-insurance policy. And if Martha killed Claude, then herself, the law said she died first and Claude inherited. So Claude's beneficiaries would get the money from Martha's insurance—and Claude's insurance money, too.

It was a lot of money. No wonder the beneficiaries were fighting. The winners got all the slices in the big, juicy pie.

"Why don't these people just split the money four ways?" I asked.

Wilcoxin's pained expression told me I didn't know all the nuances of the insurance biz. Maybe not, but I knew about greed.

"It's not that simple."

I smiled. "No, I suppose not. It never is, where money is involved."

"There's going to be a hearing in a couple of weeks," he said. "The court may rule on which of the Terrells died first based on the existing evidence. Or that the estate can be divided evenly. But until that happens, my company has to make a good-faith effort to determine who gets the money."

"Why can't the medical examiner make that call?"

"He can place time of death to the hour, but not the minute. He says they died too close together for him to be sure."

"Suicide note? Gunshot residue? Fingerprints? Weapon position?"

Wilcoxin pressed his hands to his temples. "No suicide note. Gunshot residue on the right hands of both decedents. Prints of both decedents on the weapon, which was registered to Claude

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and usually kept in a locked drawer in his nightstand. The gun was found under the table in the breakfast nook. Odd place for it to wind up, given the position of the bodies."

"I have to hand it to you, Mr. Wilcoxin. This one is a stinker."

"Will you take the case?" he asked, naked pleading in his voice.

By now I was thoroughly hooked. So I might as well follow the line and see where it led. "All right. I can't promise anything. But I'll give it my best . . ."

I almost said "shot" but caught myself in time.

"I'll need the police report, autopsy results, and lab analysis. You have crime-scene photos?"

He nodded, looking queasy. "They're awfully grim."

"They usually are. Right now I want a look at the report."

He handed the report across the desk. I began to read.

The Terrells became the late Terrells on a Friday in May, courtesy of bullets in their brains—one each. Housecleaner Estrellita Mejia arrived at approximately one o'clock that afternoon. She opened the front door with her key, went back to the kitchen, and found two bloody corpses on the floor. She ran screaming into the street, alerting a gardener working at a nearby house. He summoned police with his cell phone.

Initially the Alameda Police Department viewed the slayings as a home-invasion robbery gone bad. But nothing had been taken. Claude's wallet, full of cash and credit cards, was on his dresser. Martha's baubles were still in her jewelry case. The purported burglars ignored a cabinet full of valuable silver. That pretty much eliminated the robbery theory.

On the surface, it did look like a murder-suicide. Did Claude kill Martha and then turn the gun on himself? Or did Martha kill Claude, then take her own life? And why the hell hadn't one of them left a note detailing all the whys and wherefores?

I looked up at Wilcoxin. "No reason?"

He shook his head, his voice edged with frustration. "Out of the goddamn blue. The cops talked to family, friends, business associates, neighbors, anyone, anywhere, who might have known or met the Terrells. There's no apparent reason why Claude would kill Martha, then kill himself. Or vice versa. They were both in excellent health. They had no money problems. From all reports they were a happy, loving couple."

Happy, loving couples don't usually blow each other's brains out. So maybe the Terrells weren't as happy and loving as everyone thought. Or maybe something else was going on here.

"I'd like to take a look at the house."

Wilcoxin pulled open a desk drawer, fished out a brass key on a metal ring, and handed it to me. "The house is vacant, can't be sold until the estate is sorted out."

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I fingered the cardboard tag with the Terrells' name and address printed in black ink. "Who else has keys?"

"All four heirs."

That didn't sound like a good idea to me. He noticed my raised eyebrows. "The Terrells gave each of their children keys when they bought the house."

"The heirs have access to the property?"

"After the police took down the crime-scene tape, the lawyers let them remove personal belongings—family photos, clothing, things like that."

"What about everything else, like jewelry, and Martha's silver? I assume they're not still at the house."

"The lawyers put all the rest, except the furniture, in storage. It'll stay there until the lawyers figure out who gets what. The wills are more complicated, but that's the attorneys' battle. My battle . . . My concern is who gets the money from the insurance policies."

"Does the housecleaner still have a key?"

Wilcoxin shook his head. "That's hers."

"Any of the neighbors have keys?"

"Not to my knowledge," he said. "I'll give you the code for the alarm system."

I left with Wilcoxin's headache. I spent the rest of that Friday afternoon in my Oakland office, examining the Terrell file and making some notes of my own.

Saturday morning I drove to Alameda. The Terrells had lived at the end of a wide, tree-lined street in a part of town known as the Gold Coast, full of solid old homes. I'd grown up in a Victorian house nearby. The street, like others in this section, dead-ended at the lagoon which had once been the shore of San Francisco Bay, until the late 1950s when developers had filled in a portion of the bay to create the area called South Shore.

The Terrells' house was a two-story stucco that looked as though it dated to the nineteen thirties. I parked in the double driveway and let myself in the front door. After deactivating the security system, I stood in the entryway for a moment, getting my bearings, waiting for . . . What? Vibrations, maybe, or feelings. I've felt it at other crime scenes. I felt it here.

The investigators had long since located and removed any physical evidence. The gore had been scrubbed away. Drapes covered the windows and there was dust on the nearby stair rail. The house had that air of disuse a place gets when there's no one home for a long time. It had been closed up since the Terrells' deaths, while the heirs and their lawyers duked it out over who got what.

In the living room to my left, a sofa faced an empty fireplace.

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Heavy chairs surrounded a long table in the dining room. A cabinet with empty glass shelves stood against the wall.

Upstairs, I found a large master suite with a bathroom, and three smaller bedrooms sharing another bathroom. Closets, drawers, and cupboards were empty, stripped bare. There wasn't much left in the Terrell house, just furniture, which, along with the house itself, was awaiting disposition.

I went back downstairs. A small room off the dining room had served as Claude's office. Behind this, separated from the kitchen by a counter, was a family room. It had once been furnished, according to the photographs in the file, with a sofa, several reclining chairs, a large-screen TV, and other entertainment appliances. Now all the electronic toys were gone.

In front of me, a sliding glass door led outside to a covered patio and a fenced backyard that sloped down to the lagoon. The police report indicated the door had been open a few inches the day the Terrells died.

I walked into the kitchen, noting the location of sink, stove, refrigerator, and pantry. I saw a laundry room, where a washer and dryer crouched in semidarkness.

The breakfast nook was at the back of the kitchen, an alcove containing a round table and four chairs. Between the breakfast nook and the patio door was a bare space where the crime-scene photos showed a tall ficus in a terra cotta pot. The floor tile was slightly discolored where the plant had stood.

I set my purse on the counter between the kitchen and family room and dug out a tape measure and a rough sketch I'd drawn. The police report indicated the bodies of Claude and Martha Terrell were found lying diagonally in the middle of the kitchen, with their feet toward the plant. Claude lay on his left side, right arm resting on his hip. Martha lay on her back, to Claude's right. The autopsy report said there had been a large bruise on the back of Martha's head. Had she gotten it when she fell? But her head wasn't near a counter.

I measured distances, noting the information on my sketch. Then I lay down in the space where the Terrells had died, arranging my body in an approximation of the position of Claude's body. I gazed at my own right hand, imagining my fingers wrapped around the grip of a gun. Then I looked down the length of my legs, placing the gun on the floor beyond my feet, thinking that if either Claude or Martha had fired the weapon, it seemed to me the gun would have fallen near their bodies. So how did the gun wind up under the table in the breakfast nook, which was near the entrance to the laundry room?

I stared at the sliding glass door that had been open when the housecleaner found the bodies. Maybe that initial theory of an

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intruder wasn't so far off the mark. Murder-suicide didn't feel right, particularly without a note. Of course, suicides don't always leave notes that lay out their reasons in neat and tidy prose.

My hunch was murder. If I was right, someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make the Terrells' deaths look like murder-suicide. So why wasn't there a note, to scotch all my reasonable doubt? What if the killer hadn't finished setting up the scene? What if the housecleaner's arrival had interrupted the killer? How had Martha gotten that bruise on the back of her head?

I got to my feet, set the tape measure on the sketch, then walked to the laundry room, where another door led outside. It had revealed no sign of forced entry or fingerprints the day the Terrells had died. I glanced out the small glass window and saw a concrete-covered side yard, hidden from the street by a gate at the front of the house. Arrayed against the fence were garbage cans and recycling bins.

Just then I heard voices. Someone had entered the house. A man and two women walked into the kitchen. "Who are you?" the man demanded. "What are you doing here?"

I looked him over. His petulant expression was his own. His curly dark hair and brown eyes were mirrored in the young woman on his right. In fact, they looked so similar they might have been twins. Claude's adult children, Eric and Erin Terrell, I guessed, and the second woman was Eric's wife, Lisa.

"Jeri Howard," I said, offering my hand. "I work for the insurance company."

Eric Terrell ignored my hand and didn't bother introducing his two companions. "So when is the insurance company going to quit stalling and pay the insurance money?"

I shrugged. "You'll have to discuss that with Mr. Wilcoxin."

"We have discussed it with him, and the lawyers." Erin looked exasperated as she tossed her brunette curls. "Discussed it *ad nauseum.*"

"Then you know there's a question about who died first."

Eric snorted in derision. "That's just a stall. The insurance company wants to hang on to the money."

"There's no question in my mind who died first," Erin declared. "That bitch killed my father, then killed herself."

"Really? Why would she do that?"

"It's no secret that my father was planning to divorce her," Erin said.

That was news to me. News to Wilcoxin, too. He'd described the Terrells as a "happy, loving couple." I hadn't seen any mention of a pending breakup in the police report, either. That's the kind of question a cop would—or should—ask.

"Daddy wanted out of the marriage," Erin continued. "Martha

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didn't want to lose all of Daddy's money—they had a prenup, of course—so she killed him. Then she turned the gun on herself. She would have saved us all a lot of trouble if she'd left a note."

"I thought Mrs. Terrell had her own money," I said.

Eric's contemptuous expression let me know exactly what he thought of that. His sister shook her head. "Martha had some money. Certainly not much compared to my father's net worth."

"It seems I was misled about Mrs. Terrell's net worth," I said. "Why did your father want out of the marriage?"

Erin shrugged. "I don't know. He didn't say."

"He confided in you?"

"Not exactly."

"Then how did you know they were having problems? And that your father wanted a divorce?"

Erin made a little face. "Well, my brother . . . "

"My father confided in me," Eric said sharply. "Look, Ms. . . . whatever your name is . . . I don't know what business this is of yours."

"My name is Jeri Howard, Mr. Terrell. I work for the insurance company. Anything regarding the company's investigation into your parents' deaths is my business."

"She wasn't my parent." Erin's voice turned snippy. "My mother is very much alive, thank you."

Lisa had been watching me. She looked as though she'd like to change the subject, so she did. "You haven't said what you're doing here, Ms. Howard. I thought the insurance investigation was done."

Two could play that game. "Mr. Wilcoxin asked me to take a look at the scene. Why are the three of you here? I understood the heirs had already removed personal items, and all valuables are in storage."

Eric scowled at me but said nothing as Lisa reached for his arm. Erin said, "I'm looking for something that belonged to my father. Just a little trinket. Not important to anyone else but me. Or my brother. It wasn't in my father's things that we took earlier, so we thought we'd come over and see if we could find it."

I'd already looked through the rest of the house. I knew how empty it was. But I'd play along—for the time being.

"Have a look around. I'll finish up in here." Exasperated looks passed between Erin and Eric. Lisa, however, was staring at the counter, at the tape measure and the sketch I'd drawn.

They went upstairs. I opened the sliding glass door and stepped out onto the patio. A redwood fence, about six feet high, separated the Terrells' property from the house behind it. To my left, a tall privet hedge hid the house next-door. On my right, the backyard sloped gently down to the lagoon, where several ducks paddled on the water. Across the lagoon, houses of more recent vintage were grouped around a cul-de-sac. Several homes had docks, some with boats.

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I walked toward the lagoon, where a little rocky beach provided a landing, surrounded by overgrown bushes. Now I could see the house across the street from the Terrells' place, a big two-story Victorian. Any one of the upstairs front windows would have provided an excellent view of the Terrells' house and yard, but the police report said none of the neighbors had been home when the Terrells died.

When I returned to the house, the surviving Terrells were ready to leave. I set the alarm on my way out. Eric drove a boxy silver SUV, new and expensive, with a license-plate holder from an Oakland dealership. He'd parked to the left of my Toyota, so close it was as though he was marking territory by taking up as much of the driveway as possible. He must be one of those irritating people who parked his car straddling two spaces in parking lots, so that his car wouldn't get hit. I squeezed into the gap between the vehicles. When I opened my car door, it brushed against his.

"Watch it," Eric said sharply. "Do you have any idea how much it costs to repair the finish on one of these?"

I didn't say anything. It's childish, I know, but I found myself fighting down the urge to key his car. It would have been enormously satisfying to scratch that expensive silver finish. But I didn't.

"That's their version," Pamela Allen said that evening when I told her what Eric and Erin Terrell had said about their father's plans to divorce Pamela's mother. "Mom and Claude were happy, as far as I know."

We were in the living room of Pamela's house in Hayward. Her husband Ralph and their young daughter were outside, washing the family car.

"Would your mother have confided in you?" I asked.

"I don't think she would have kept something like that to herself. On the other hand, she may not have wanted to burden me with her troubles. I have enough of my own right now." Pamela glanced out at her husband. Did her troubles have something to do with her own marriage?

"Whether they were having problems or not," she continued, "I can't imagine Mom killing Claude—or anyone, for that matter. My brother and I were devastated by this. Our father wasn't around after he and Mom split up. So she was all we had."

"What about the possibility that Claude killed your mother, then himself?"

She shook her head. "I just can't see it. I suppose it's possible, but why? None of this makes any sense."

"How did you get on with Claude's children?"

"We weren't close," she said. "We tolerated each other for our parents' sake. Erin and I don't have much in common. Eric's a pompous ass. His wife's all right. I haven't seen them since shortly

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after the funeral. Neither Eric nor Erin wanted their father to remarry. They never accepted my mother."

"This insurance policy leaves you and your brother a lot of money."

"I know. And we could use it. Six months ago my husband got downsized. My brother's between jobs. So yes, things are tight right now. We're living on my salary as a teacher and our savings. That insurance money, and what Mom left us in her will, would really come in handy. But neither Colin nor I had anything to do with Mom's death."

"What about Claude's kids?"

She shrugged. "As far as I know, they had good relations with their father. I don't think either of them have any financial problems."

Whether any of the heirs had any financial problems was something I intended to find out. I started a background check on both sets of offspring. Later that day I went back to the neighborhood where Claude and Martha Terrell had lived. The big Victorian across the street, with a view of the Terrells' yard from its upstairs windows, was owned by the Brandons, who both worked. They hadn't been home the day of the deaths, and their two teenaged daughters had been in school. I got similar stories at other houses. The only people who were in the neighborhood that day were the housecleaner who had discovered the bodies and the gardener who had called the police.

I met Estrellita Mejia the next day at her Oakland home, as she returned from cleaning other people's houses. She sat down in her living-room recliner and flipped up the foot rest. "When you called earlier, I didn't want to talk with you. But I decided I should."

"Why didn't you want to talk?" I asked. "Are you afraid of something? Or someone?"

"It's not that. What happened to the Terrells was awful. It was horrible." She shuddered. "Finding them like that. I'd like to help. But I wonder if I'm breaking a confidence to talk about them, even under these circumstances."

That sparked my interest. I wondered what Mrs. Mejia might have overheard in the Terrell household that fell into the category of confidences.

"I know this is difficult for you. But I need some answers. What time did you get there that afternoon?"

"About one o'clock that day. I went there every Friday, though usually later in the afternoon. One of my regulars had canceled that morning, so I was early. I walked to the back of the house, heading for the laundry room, where the cleaning supplies are kept."

"Before you saw the bodies, did you see anything out of the ordinary?"

"The sliding door was open."

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"Did you see anything on the floor between the end of the counter and the plant?"

She shook her head. "I didn't see the gun. Believe me, I would have noticed a gun."

"Then what?"

"I came around the end of the counter. From the corner of my eye I saw something on the floor in front of the sink. I looked down—" She grimaced. "I saw two people lying there, covered in blood. I didn't even realize who it was. I just saw all that blood."

"What did you do then?"

"I backed away. I had my hands up, like this." She held her hands up as though warding off a blow. "I backed into the plant. It scared me. It was as tall as me. When I felt the leaves brush against the back of my head and my face, I screamed. I thought someone had grabbed me from behind. I panicked. My foot kicked something. I thought it was the pot. But it must have been the gun. I looked down and saw something moving across the floor toward the table. I didn't stick around to see what it was."

That explained how the murder weapon wound up in the breakfast nook.

"I ran out the front door," Mrs. Mejia continued. "The gardener was next door. He called the police. Later I gave my statement. Then I came home."

"How long had you worked for the Terrells?" I asked.

"The whole time they were married. And before. I used to clean for Mrs. Terrell before she married Mr. Terrell."

"So you knew Martha Terrell fairly well?"

"As well as you can know someone you work for."

"Had you seen or heard anything that might indicate that Mr. and Mrs. Terrell were having marital difficulties?"

"No, it was a good marriage. Mrs. Terrell once told me she was happier with Mr. Terrell than with her first husband."

That might cover Martha's feelings, I thought, but it didn't account for Claude's perspective.

"Did they have disagreements about money? Or about their children from their previous marriages?" I asked. Finances and offspring were two of the biggest frictions in any marriage.

She hesitated.

"I know you don't want to speak out of turn, but anything you overheard might be important."

"Well, there were arguments. About money."

"Between Mr. and Mrs. Terrell?"

"Sometimes. But it wasn't disagreements between the two of them. It was mixed up with their children."

Now we were getting somewhere. "How so?"

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"Mr. Terrell didn't like it that Mrs. Terrell gave money to Colin. He said Colin should learn to stand on his own two feet."

Mr. Terrell may have had a point. But I didn't have enough information yet to make that call. "So Colin had money troubles, and Mom kept bailing him out."

Mrs. Mejia nodded. "Mrs. Terrell told me some of it. The rest I overheard. Colin can't decide what he wants to do with his life. He dropped out of college, then he went back. He got a degree and a teaching credential, like his sister. After teaching for a few years he signed on with a dot-com company. He hadn't been there very long when the tech boom went bust and he was out. Then it was law school. He stuck with that for a year before he quit. Since last summer he's been working temp jobs. He couldn't afford to pay rent on his apartment, so he moved in with his girlfriend. He has trouble making ends meet."

"So there was some tension," I said. "Did you overhear any arguments between Colin and his mother?"

"Yes, several months ago. Mrs. Terrell said Colin should settle on something, either teaching or law school. Colin got defensive, they argued, and Mr. Terrell got involved. Colin stormed out of the house. Later Mrs. Terrell told me she probably shouldn't keep helping Colin, but he was her son. I understood. I'd do the same for my kids. She said Mr. Terrell got upset because she gave Colin money, but it was her own money. Besides, he wrote lots of checks to his own son."

"Same situation?" I asked. "Eric has trouble deciding what he wants to be when he grows up?"

"Not quite the same. Eric knows what he wants to be—the boss. He started his own business, but it failed."

"His father bankrolled him?"

"Yes," Mrs. Mejia said. "Mrs. Terrell told me Mr. Terrell lost a lot of money when Eric's business went under, about a year ago. Eric wanted to start another business."

"How do you know that?"

"I overheard another argument, a couple of weeks before the Terrells died. Mr. Terrell and Eric had a big fight, words mostly. I was upstairs cleaning. They were in the backyard and the windows were open. I looked out and saw them shouting at each other. Eric said his father was being selfish, he had plenty of money. Mr. Terrell said that wasn't the point. He wasn't going to give Eric any more, because Eric didn't have a head for business, and he wasn't going to throw good money after bad."

"You said their fight was mostly words. Did it get physical?"

Mrs. Mejia frowned. "Yes. Their voices got louder, then Eric grabbed his father's arm. That was when Mrs. Terrell came out of the house, telling them to stop."

It sounded as though there were some longstanding issues

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about money in the Terrell family, between father and son, and between mother and son as well. Mrs. Mejia's version of Colin's work history was different from his sister's. Pamela had said he was between jobs, but she'd left out the fact that he'd moved from job to job, and had attended law school.

What if Colin's stint as a law student had brought him into contact with the details of Probate Code Section 250? What if his financial problems led him to stage the Terrells' supposed murder-suicide? The legal connection got muddier when the background check I'd initiated on the beneficiaries revealed that both Erin Terrell and her sister-in-law Lisa worked in law offices. Lisa was an administrative assistant in a general-practice firm in Oakland, where she and Eric lived. She had access to the California codes. So did Erin, who was a paralegal in one of the big San Francisco firms, one that practiced several types of law, including wills and trusts.

I dug into the details of Eric Terrell's failed business. He had attempted to carve out his own niche in the high-tech boom, right about the time the bottom fell out of the so-called new economy. The venture lost a lot of money. He was now working at a software firm in Oakland, doomed to a day job until his inheritance freed him to start another business.

Time to start looking at alibis, I thought.

Sergeant Lipensky, Alameda Police Department, looked skeptical when I spoke with him that afternoon. "Erin was in a meeting at that law firm where she works," he said. "Pamela was in front of a fourth-grade class in Hayward. Eric dropped his car off at a dealership in Oakland for service that morning. He didn't even have transportation. Took BART and the bus to work."

"What about Lisa, Eric's wife? And Ralph Allen, Pamela's husband? He's out of work."

"Lisa was working that day. She had lunch with friends at about the same time the Terrells died. Ralph had a job interview in Pleasanton."

"Colin Baker? He does temp work, doesn't have a fixed place of employment."

"I know that. He was working at a law firm that day. All that week, in fact."

Another law firm, I thought. No surprise, really. The Bay Area was lousy with lawyers. "You talked with someone at the firm?"

"I talked with someone at the temp agency, who checked his timecard, which has to be signed by someone at the firm. What makes you think this is anything but murder-suicide?"

"No note. The position of the gun. My gut." Lipensky didn't say anything. "What about your gut?"

"Well . . . my gut doesn't like it, either," he admitted. "No note,

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the gun. No apparent reason. Looks like they were happily married, no problems."

"When I encountered Erin and Eric the other day at the house, Erin informed me that Claude was planning to divorce Martha, so of course Martha killed him, then killed herself."

"First I've heard of any divorce," Lipensky said, on the alert.

"That's what I figured. Turns out Erin got that story from her brother, who says his father confided in him. No way to verify that."

"What do Martha's kids say about a divorce?"

"Pamela denies it. I haven't talked with Colin yet. Say, what was the name of that law firm where he was working the day of the deaths?"

Lipensky told me. "You'll let me know if you find out anything." It wasn't a question.

"Of course. I always cooperate with the authorities."

I met Henry Van, the gardener who'd called the police, in front of the house where he was working. He brushed dirt from his hands as we introduced ourselves, then took a bottle of water from the cooler in the back of his pickup truck, opened it, and drank. "Don't know what I can tell you that you don't already know."

"Describe what you saw."

"The Krimmlakers weren't home. They're the people I garden for on that street. I'm there every other week. The time varies. I've got three other clients in that part of Alameda. I arrived around eleven o'clock. I must have been there when the Terrells got killed, but I didn't see or hear anything."

"You may have, without realizing it."

He looked dubious. "I was trimming hedges in the back. Power tool, makes a lot of noise."

"See any cars or people in the area? Anyone near the Terrells' house, or the Victorian across the street, where the Brandons live?"

He shook his head. "Nope. That time of day, most people are at work. It was a school day. None of the kids were around."

"Did you break for lunch?"

"Sure. After twelve and my stomach was growling. I went round to the front of the house and—" He stopped. "Wait a minute. I did see someone. A couple of teenagers. I was sitting in my truck eating lunch. I saw them in my rearview mirror as they walked past me. They headed up the driveway of that house across the street and went in the front door. I didn't think anything about it till now. I figured they were coming home from school for lunch."

"Can you describe them?"

"She was pretty," he said. "Long brown hair. Maybe fifteen or sixteen. The guy was older. Lanky build, red hair, tattoos on his arms, pierced ears."

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I'd caught a glimpse of the two Brandon daughters when I'd interviewed their parents. One was old enough to drive a lime-green Beetle. She had dark, knowing eyes and wore her dark brown hair short with bangs. The other looked younger, and she had light brown hair falling past her shoulders.

"What happened after they went inside? Did you see them come out?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I heard rock music. Really loud. Ate my sandwich, finished trimming hedges, cleaned up the cuttings. I was working on the shrubs in the front when the housekeeper went into the house next-door. It wasn't more than a couple of minutes before she ran out the front door screaming that there were dead bodies in the house. I whipped out my cell phone and called nine-one-one."

"So you never saw the two teenagers leave the house?"

He thought for a moment. "Not actually leave the house, no, I didn't. But I saw them outside. I'm not sure when. It's all mixed up after I called the cops. I had to wait around and give a statement. Didn't get out of there till after four. There were a lot of people around. But sometime after the cops got there, I saw that girl and the guy. Hard to miss him, with that red hair. They were on the cross street, getting into an old car."

Henry said the car was a Plymouth Barracuda, blue decorated with rust stains. I thanked him and drove over to the neighborhood where the Terrells had lived. I didn't see the Plymouth in the vicinity, but the Beetle was parked in the driveway of the Brandons' house. I parked near the corner and waited. It was summer now. The two Brandon daughters were out of school. Half an hour passed. Finally the girl with short hair came out the front door, got into the Beetle, and fired up the engine. She backed out of the drive. I started my car and followed her.

She drove to South Shore Center and parked near the department store located at one end. I intercepted her as she got out of her car. "Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

She looked me over. "I remember you. The private eye who came to talk with my parents about Mr. and Mrs. Terrell."

"I didn't get your name that day. Or your sister's."

"It's Sasha. My sister's name is Missy." She pointed to her right. "There's a Starbucks over there."

Sasha led the way to the espresso emporium. I ordered a latte for myself, a triple mocha with extra whipped cream for Sasha, and threw in a couple of biscotti for good measure. Once we were seated, I laid my cards on the table.

"The day the Terrells died, someone saw a girl with long brown hair at your house. Would that be Missy?"

Sasha sighed. "It would."

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"She was with a guy. Lanky build, red hair, tattoos on his arms, and pierced ears. Ring any bells?"

She made a face. "Cody. He's way older than Missy, eighteen or nineteen. Mom would burst a blood vessel if she knew."

"Missy and Cody were seen going into your house around noon, before the bodies were found. And again after the bodies were found. It was a weekday. You and your sister should have been in school, unless Missy came home for lunch. All afternoon would have been a long lunch."

"She cut," Sasha said. "One of my friends told me about it later that day. She said Missy split after her third class, when Cody showed up."

"What do you figure they were doing at the house that afternoon?"

"Each other. Having sex." Sasha poked her biscotti through the thick layer of whipped cream to the coffee below. Then she drew it out and bit off the end with great relish.

"What makes you think that?"

"When I got home from school, I went looking for Missy, to bawl her out for cutting classes. She'd pulled all the sheets off her bed and washed them. They were piled on her bed, still warm from the dryer."

"How do you get from there to Missy and Cody having sex?"

"Like Miss La-Di-Da would be doing laundry for the hell of it? Right. Only one reason she'd be washing sheets in the middle of the afternoon on a school day. She and Cody were screwing their brains out up in her bedroom."

I gave Sasha points for deductive reasoning. I'd come to the same conclusion without the sheets. "I'd like to talk with Missy and Cody."

"You think they saw something?"

"Maybe. Any idea where I can find them?"

"Not exactly, but they're together right now. She thinks I don't know because he parks his car on the side street and she tells Mom she's meeting her girlfriends. Puhleez!" She rolled her eyes. "If you stake out our place, he'll bring her home eventually. If Missy won't cooperate, tell her I know—and I'll tell."

I left Sasha to her shopping and went back to the neighborhood, parking on the side street where Cody usually met Missy Brandon. Finally I saw the rusty blue Plymouth pull up to the curb. Two people got out of the car, a teenaged girl with long brown hair and a tall young man with a carrot-top and tattoos snaking up both arms. They locked lips and bodies, not coming up for air until I walked up and called them by name.

"Who the hell are you?" Cody growled.

"I'm the private investigator who was at Missy's house a couple of days ago, asking questions about her neighbors and the day they died. Now I want to talk with both of you."

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"Why?" she asked, wide-eyed. "We don't know anything. I was in school when that happened."

"No, you weren't. The gardener working at the Krimmlakers' house saw you and Cody go into the house. He also saw you and Cody getting into Cody's car later that afternoon, after the police had arrived. So you were both there. Sasha knows. She suggests you cooperate with me."

Missy looked panicky when I mentioned Sasha. "We didn't see anything. We were making out."

"I have a pretty good idea what you were doing," I told them. "So does Sasha. Take me through it step by step." They looked scandalized, which was refreshing, in a way. "I don't mean your grand passion. You may have seen something without realizing it could be important. Tell me what you heard and saw as you were walking up the street toward your house."

They exchanged glances. "We parked here so Cody's car wouldn't be in front of my house," Missy said.

"That gardening truck was in the driveway of the other house," Cody said. "Didn't see anybody in the yard. He must have been in the cab."

"What did you do once you got into Missy's house?"

"We went up to the bedroom." He glared at me. "You want to know how many times we did it?"

"Spare me. I just want to know if you looked out the window anytime during the next few hours."

"Yeah, a couple of times."

"Did you see anyone?"

He thought about it. "The gardener."

"Besides him."

"UPS guy left a package at a house down by the corner." He rubbed his nose. "There was a guy in a boat on the lagoon."

That caught my interest. "What was he doing?"

"Rowing," Cody said. "He rowed across to a house on the other side, pulled up to a dock, and got out."

"That house directly across the lagoon?" Missy frowned. "I saw a guy there, too. But he wasn't rowing a boat. He was at the side of the house, where the trash cans were. I thought he was a garbageman. He was wearing coveralls."

Cody shook his head. "I saw the coveralls, but why would a garbageman be in a rowboat?"

Good question. Maybe he wasn't a garbageman. "What did he look like? What color were the coveralls?"

"Light blue, or maybe green," Cody said. "I only saw him from the back. He had a ball cap on his head. Couldn't tell what color his hair was."

"I saw him from the front," Missy said. "It was an Oakland A's

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cap, green and yellow. I figured he was a garbageman because he had stains all over the front of the coveralls. You know how yucky those guys get."

"He could have been a mechanic," Cody said. "Mechanics wear coveralls when they're working on cars. They get grease and oil stains all over themselves." He stopped, as though something had suddenly occurred to him. "Those stains. Like maybe that was blood? Man, are you telling me that guy was a killer?"

"Like you said, why would a garbageman—or a mechanic—be rowing a boat across the lagoon? You two are going to have to talk to the police."

Missy protested. She didn't want her folks to know she and Cody had been doing the nasty boogie that day. But now that Cody realized he was a witness, he was eager to cooperate. I walked with them to the Brandons' house, just as Sasha returned from her shopping trip. I called the girls' parents and Sergeant Lipensky. Once the adults got there, I headed for the cul-de-sac at the other side of the lagoon and took a look at the house directly opposite the Brandons' place. There was no one home, but the yard wasn't fenced. Sure enough, there was a small rowboat tied up to a dock. A row of garbage cans and recycling bins were lined up along the side of the house, about thirty feet from the dock.

I began ringing doorbells. I found a witness, an elderly woman who lived in the cul-de-sac. "I saw a man. He was walking between the houses. No, he wasn't wearing coveralls. Slacks and a shirt, I think, and an A's baseball cap. He got into a car parked in front of my house." She didn't know the make or model of the vehicle, but she thought the car was green.

I left a message for Lipensky about the witness, then returned to my office. I already knew Eric drove a silver SUV. Now a database told me Colin Baker, Martha Terrell's son, owned a blue Honda. I had other information pointing me in Colin's direction.

He opened the door of the Oakland apartment he shared with his girlfriend looking slightly disheveled, feet bare below his faded jeans and stained T-shirt. He ran a hand through his shaggy blond hair and squinted at the business card I'd handed him while I explained I was working for the insurance company.

He stuck the card into his pocket. "My mother didn't kill Claude. Or herself. The court's going to have to split everything four ways."

"May I come in? I have some questions."

"Sure." He waved me into the living room and shut the door. "I don't know what I can tell you. I was at work that day."

"No, you weren't."

He took a step back, his expression going from stunned to frightened.

"I checked, Colin. You called and told the supervisor at the law

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firm where you were temping that you were sick. She didn't check with the temp agency because she assumed you'd called them. You didn't. Edie Walker at the temp agency covered for you. Your girlfriend—the same Edie Walker whose name is on the lease of this apartment. You weren't at work. You weren't home, either. One of your neighbors saw you leave the apartment that morning. Where were you that day?"

He looked panicky. "It's not what you think."

"What I think might very well be what the cops think when they find out you lied. Time to come clean."

"I couldn't get out of bed that morning. I just couldn't face another day at that temp job. I told Edie I wasn't feeling well. Later, when we found out Mom and Claude were dead, she thought it looked bad and she told that cop I'd been at work."

"Where were you?"

He stared down at his feet. "At the movies."

"All day?"

"Yeah, all day. The theater at Jack London Square starts showing movies in the morning. There was this flick I wanted to see. I sat through it twice. I wound up staying there the whole day, going from theater to theater. You're not supposed to do that, but I sneaked in and out. I'd go to the john, then I'd buy popcorn and Milk Duds. I dump the Milk Duds in the popcorn and the candy gets all warm and gooey." I stared at him and he stopped prattling.

"Have you still got the ticket stub?"

"Hell, I don't think so. Who saves ticket stubs?"

"They have a way of roosting in pockets and wallets. You'd better start looking. And hope someone at the theater can back up your story."

Colin checked his wallet and the jacket he'd been wearing that day but came up with lint and a couple of paper strips from fortune cookies. Not much of an alibi. We went out to his car. The blue Honda's floorboards were filled with fast-food wrappers, empty bottles and cans, and other debris. He dug around in this mess and came up with a receipt from a restaurant at Jack London Square. "I had a pizza afterwards."

"After all that popcorn?" I examined the receipt. The date and time printed on the slip were blurred. "This tells me nothing."

"It's the truth." He sounded scared.

"All right. I'll check it out."

I went down to the multiplex in Jack London Square. A manager told me hundreds of people cycled through the place on any given day. How could they be expected to remember one guy? And if he'd been found jumping from theater to theater in the course of an afternoon, they'd have escorted him to the exit.

"I remember him." It was a young woman behind the re-

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freshment counter.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "A guy in his late twenties, blond, blue eyes. Spent the afternoon watching movies and eating a lot of Milk Duds dumped in his popcorn."

"That's why I remember him," she said. "I'd never seen anyone do that to buttered popcorn before, and I said so. He told me it made the candy warm and gooey."

"Sounds like my guy," I said. "Was he here most of the day?"

She nodded. "I noticed him after the first show let out. He went into the john, came out, bought some more popcorn and candy, and went back into the theater. Same thing after the next show. I saw him several times and joked with him about putting candy in his popcorn."

"If you knew he was jumping theaters, you should have reported him," the manager huffed. "The guy was here all afternoon and only bought one movie ticket."

"Lighten up," she argued. "He spent five times that on popcorn, candy, and sodas."

So Colin's story, strange as it was, checked out. My teeth hurt when I thought about melting Milk Duds in hot, buttered popcorn.

I went over the alibis in my head. Colin at the movies. Pamela teaching school. Ralph at a job interview. Erin in a meeting. Lisa having lunch with friends. That left Eric, supposedly at work, with no transportation because he'd left his car to be serviced. He'd taken BART and the bus to work. Many car dealerships had shuttles to BART, I recalled. Maybe a driver would remember him. Maybe one of his coworkers had seen him.

Eric worked at a software firm at the end of Edgewater Drive, across I-880 from the Oakland Coliseum. To get there on public transit, he'd have taken BART to the Coliseum station, then a bus along Hegenberger Road. Once he got off the bus, it was a half-mile hike to his office. The business park where he worked consisted of four buildings grouped around a central fountain, with a big parking lot in back. Eric's employer had all three floors of Building C. It looked as though I'd need a name badge to get past the receptionist. But I didn't want to get past her. I wanted to talk with her.

There was a deli on the first floor of Building D, with tables outside, the only eating establishment in the area, from what I could see. I bought a glass of lemonade and waited until I saw the receptionist leaving for lunch. She walked into the deli and went through the salad bar. As she stepped away from the cash register with her container, I approached her, business card in hand, glancing at her name badge.

"Ms. Linden, may I ask you a few questions?"

She read my card, then gave me a hard look over her salad. "What is this about?"

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"Eric Terrell."

"What about him?" she asked with a frown.

"I'm trying to verify his whereabouts on a particular day. I understand you told the police that he was at work that day."

"If you're talking about the day his parents died, I already talked with a cop."

"I know. But I'd like to hear it from you."

She shrugged. "Yes, he was at work. I saw him come in a little after nine, and I saw him leave at a quarter after four."

"Did he take a lunch break?"

She nodded. "He left about eleven-thirty."

"What time did he come back?"

"That I can't tell you," she said. "I was at lunch myself from one to two. But he wasn't back by the time I left."

Hour and a half, probably two hours. Would Eric have had enough time to hike up to Hegenberger, catch a bus to BART, then another bus from a BART station further up the line to Alameda, murder his father and stepmother, then make the return trip?

"He told the police he had his SUV serviced that day," I said. "Dropped it off in the morning and picked it up in the evening."

"He mentioned it to me when he came in that morning. Something about being late because he had to drop off his car."

"So he didn't have transportation that day. I wonder why he took such a long lunch hour."

"He had transportation that day," she said.

"How do you know that?"

"Normally I leave at five, but I left early that day. He was parked clear over on the other side of the lot, nowhere near our building. I just happened to see him getting into a car. I assumed it was a loaner from the dealership."

That *ka-ching* sound in my head was the coin dropping. If Eric had a car the day of the Terrells' deaths, it would have taken him twenty minutes to drive from his office to the house in Alameda. He already had the motive. Now he had the opportunity.

"Can you describe the car?"

"I'm not sure what kind it was. A sedan, green or blue."

I thanked her and headed back downtown. Eric had purchased his SUV from a dealership on Broadway. I talked my way into the service department, where a mechanic remembered Eric. "Yeah, for a couple of reasons. He dropped the car off that morning and picked it up later that day, about a quarter to five."

I pointed at the sign that indicated the service department had a shuttle available to their customers. "Did your shuttle take him anywhere?"

The mechanic shook his head. "No, he insisted on a loaner."

"Are you sure?"

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"Yeah. That's one of the reasons I remember him. He made such a stink about it. We were short of loaners that day and he insisted he had to have a car. Said something about meeting an important client. So we gave him a car. That one, as a matter of fact." He pointed at a late-model sedan with a paint job the manufacturer called "seafoam" or "teal." I called it greenish blue.

"What was the other reason?"

"One of the mechanics claims this guy Terrell took a pair of coveralls off a hook in the garage. We asked Terrell about it when he brought back the car. He got all riled and said what the hell would he want with some coveralls."

I looked at the blue coveralls the mechanic was wearing and thought of a very good reason Eric Terrell wanted those coveralls. He'd worn them to protect his clothing from the blood spatters the day he murdered his father and stepmother.

"So Claude died first," Wilcoxin said.

I nodded. "Eric was angry because Claude wouldn't give him the money to start another business. He decided to collect his inheritance early."

Eric had been calm when Sergeant Lipensky confronted him with the evidence, his voice emotionless as he described how he'd planned and executed the murders.

"He'd seen the house on the other side of the lagoon with the dock and rowboat, easy to get to because there was no fenced yard. So he concocted his no-car alibi and lifted the coveralls from the dealership. Once he got to Alameda, he parked in the cul-de-sac, put on the coveralls, and rowed across the lagoon. He went in the side door and surprised Claude and Martha. He hit them both over the head, then shot them. That's why the ME found a bruise on Martha's head."

"How did Eric know about the Slayer Statute?"

"His sister had mentioned it in conjunction with a case at the law firm where she works. That got him thinking about how he could arrange to inherit everything. He'd written a note, purportedly from Martha, claiming that she'd killed Claude because she discovered he was going to divorce her. But the housecleaner arrived early that day. Eric heard her come in the front door, so he bailed out the patio door. He dropped the gun at the foot of the plant and didn't have time to take the note out of his pocket. Once he rowed back across the lagoon, he stripped off the bloody coveralls and disposed of them in a trash can. Then he walked out to the cul-de-sac where the witness saw him get into the loaner from the dealership."

"Good work." Wilcoxin closed the Terrell file, picked up the envelope containing my check, and handed it across his desk. "You've earned this." ●

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Silent Partner

by Scott Mackay

Detective Barry Gilbert knelt over the body of Jason Morrell. Morrell was a black man in his early forties. The victim lay on his back, four bullet holes in his chest, his white dress shirt soaked with blood, his striped tie tossed by the wind over his left shoulder. His jacket—a bomber with the emblem of Morris T. Hewitt Collegiate Institute on the left breast—was open. His gray flannels, speckled now with blood, rode low on his hips, revealing the waistband of his blue boxers. He held a gold chain in his hand. A small goat's head amulet dangled from the chain.

Scott Mackay's new Barry Gilbert story will see print at the same time as his new Gilbert novel, which is scheduled for 9/03 (St. Martin's). *Old Scores* is the third book in the Arthur Ellis Award-winning series. Mr. Mackay also writes science fiction novels. (See *The Disintegrating Man;* Roc.) He is currently nominated for the Arthur Ellis for his 1/02 *EQMM* story "The Christmas-Tree Farm." †

Gilbert rose, his arthritic knees pinching him, and looked around Regent Park, a government-subsidized housing project not far from the Don River. Low-rises stretched identically along the walkway: red-brick dwellings, three stories high, with twelve apartments apiece. Local residents, mainly black and East Indian, gazed out apartment windows at the police activity. Uniformed police officers secured the crime scene with yellow police tape. The coroner's van, a black Plymouth Voyager as gleaming as a piece of polished obsidian, drove up onto the grass.

Gilbert waited for his young partner, Joe Lombardo, to come back from a first quick search for witnesses. While he waited, he looked around for shells. Four gunshots, but where were the shells? Powder burns on Morrell's white shirt indicated close-range discharges. That meant the shells had to be around here somewhere. But where? He concluded the killer had been smart. The killer had picked up after himself.

Lombardo, wearing a dashing gray suit and a long leather coat, came back a few minutes later with Morrell's wallet in a plastic

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Ziploc evidence bag. He walked along the crumbling sidewalk with a young black man. The two stopped at the garbage Dumpster and talked. Then Lombardo directed the man to the nearest uniformed police officer and came over to Gilbert.

"Who's the guy?" asked Gilbert.

Lombardo grinned, proud of himself. "A witness," he said.

Gilbert raised his eyebrows. "Does he know the shooter?" he asked.

Lombardo's grin faded. "He saw the whole thing from that door over there. So he was a good ways off. It was dark at the time. But at least we have something. He says it happened around five A.M."

"Did he get a description?" asked Gilbert.

"A black male, six feet, two hundred and fifty pounds." Lombardo gestured toward the parking lot. "He fled the scene in a late-model white or beige four-door sedan." Lombardo lifted Morrell's wallet. "I phoned the victim's home," he said.

"And?" said Gilbert.

"He's married," said Lombardo. "His wife's name is Lorna. He has two kids. They live out on Morningview. The East End. Way out."

"So you spoke to his wife," said Gilbert.

"Just to inform her," said Lombardo. "I wrecked her day."

Gilbert nodded, then turned to Morrell. "He's a long way from Morningview," he said. "I wonder what he's doing down here."

Lombardo glanced around. "This is gang turf." Out on Gerrard Street a streetcar rumbled by. "And no way he's a gang member."

"I think he's a schoolteacher," said Gilbert. "Look at that jacket. Morris T. Hewitt Collegiate Institute. Isn't that out in the East End, too?"

"I think so," said Lombardo. "Maybe he came to buy drugs. Maybe this is drug-related."

"He would have been robbed," said Gilbert. Gilbert nodded at the wallet. "He still has three hundred dollars in there."

Lombardo scanned the winter-worn grass. "Did you find any shells?" asked his young partner.

"Not yet," said Gilbert. "And it doesn't look promising."

Lombardo's eyes rested on the gold chain in Morrell's hand. "What do you make of that chain?" he asked.

"Gang stuff. I'm going to have Devon Lewis in Narcotics take a look at it."

"That goat's head," said Lombardo. "That's definitely gang."

Dr. Blackstein, the coroner, assured the detectives he would do his best to preserve any slugs recovered from the victim's body.

"The shooter picked up his brass," Gilbert told Blackstein, "and right now the slugs are all we have."

"I'll do my best," said Dr. Blackstein, "but as you can see on these X-rays, three of the slugs hit bone, and they're mashed up badly.

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This fourth one . . . I don't know. Dan Murphy over in Ballistics will have to have a look at it. He might match it to some of the other slugs you have on file from other murders." The doctor gave the detectives an inquiring look. "Are you both staying for the autopsy?"

"I'll be staying," said Lombardo. "Barry's driving out to Scarborough to talk to the wife."

Gilbert drove out to Scarborough an hour later.

When he arrived, Morrell's wife, Lorna, invited him into the kitchen. Gilbert was perplexed by Lorna's evident composure.

"I find my strength in Jesus Christ," she explained.

But he still thought she would have been more upset. Her husband's murder was barely eight hours old.

"Did he have friends in Regent Park?" he asked. "We can't figure out why he was down there."

"He keeps contact with many of his former students," Lorna told him, in the sing-songy tones of her Kingston accent.

"We guessed he was a teacher," said Gilbert. "At Morris T. Hewitt?"

"Yes," said Lorna. "As I find strength in Jesus Christ, so he finds strength in his students. Last night he was with Gabby. Gabby is a great support to him."

Gilbert took out his notebook. "Gabby," he said, jotting the name down. "Do you know her last name?"

"Sheridan," she said.

He jotted that down as well.

"And she was his . . . student?" he asked.

A patient grin came to Lorna's face. "Six or seven years ago, yes, she was." She shook her head sadly. "But she's become considerably more since that time." Her grin broadened into a deprecating smile. "I know he finds solace in her, and in that little child of theirs, just as I find solace in the Lord Jesus Christ."

Gilbert paused. "They have a child together?"

She gave him a stolid nod. "Jason and I live our lives . . . how shall I put it? Yes, together, but also apart. It's better for us this way. I have nothing against Gabby. And I have nothing against that child of theirs. The child is God's gift. As Jason's been troubled for so many years, I urged him to find what solace he could in Gabby, and to see if he could find his way to Christ through that dear sweet child. I knew Jesus Christ was making me do the right thing. Jesus allowed me to find it in my heart to preserve his home out here in Scarborough, and to raise our two wonderful boys, but also to bless and forgive Jason in his love for Gabby. Jason was so troubled. Not even the medication helped him. Gabby was his support."

"So . . . he was depressed?" ventured Gilbert.

"This is what the doctor calls it," said Lorna. "But I believe it

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was simply his resistance to Christ. The poor man went to church every week but he never opened his heart to the true Lord and Savior. And until a man comes into the house of Christ, he can never hope to be happy or at peace with himself."

Gilbert noticed a framed photograph on the wall. It showed a church minister handing Morrell a large cardboard check.

"That's Jason there?" he said.

Lorna glanced at the picture. "That's him just a month ago," she said. "In one of his proudest moments."

"Did he win a lottery?" asked Gilbert.

Lorna laughed—she evidently thought this speculation the funniest thing she had ever heard.

"No . . . no, of course not." She gazed at the photograph with the indulgence of a mother for a favorite but errant son. "He raised money at our church for a school in Jamaica. Now the school will stay open. It was his old school, Sanderson School." She gestured at the photograph. "He wanted all the boys and girls in the area to have a school to go to. He was God's instrument, even though he didn't know it. The Lord will pick the unlikeliest servants at times."

Gilbert found Gabby Sheridan in her Regent Park apartment with her two small children early that afternoon.

She was a hazel-skinned Jamaican beauty in her mid twenties, slim, not particularly tall, but delicate and feminine.

She knew about Morrell's murder.

"The lady downstairs told me," she said.

Her eyes were puffy; she'd been crying.

"I was talking to Lorna Morrell this afternoon," said Gilbert. "Tell me, is the boy Jason's, or is the girl?"

"Jason fathered the boy," she said. "His name is Michael. My daughter's name is Judith."

Gabby had her hair wrapped in a tropical piece of cloth and wore an amber necklace around her throat.

"So . . . Jason was here last night?" asked Gilbert.

"He comes every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday," said Gabby. "Lorna understands that. She knows those are our nights. She has her man friend on those nights. A sweet old St. Anne boy."

Gilbert took a moment to consider this. As this was the first mention of any black male to enter the investigation, he of course couldn't help thinking of their witness description: tall, black, two hundred and fifty pounds, fleeing the scene in a white or beige late-model four-door sedan. Maybe this sweet old St. Anne boy might match their witness description. He took out his notebook.

"Do you know this . . . this man friend's name?" he asked.

"Judith, don't put that in your mouth!" The little girl, three years old, chewed on the corner of an *Ebony* magazine. "It's dirty."

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Gabby got up and yanked the magazine from the girl's hands. The girl began to cry. Gabby scooped the child up. "There's my little angel," she said. "You can't be putting things in your mouth. No, you can't. It's nasty, nasty."

Gilbert tried again. "I was just wondering if you knew this man friend's name."

Gabby rocked the child. "Trelawny," she said.

"Trelawny?"

"Trelawny Holmes," she said. "A true gentleman. When the doctor said Jason was sick, all Trelawny wanted to do was help."

Gilbert jotted the name into his notebook. "Could you describe him?"

Her eyes narrowed. "He's black. He's big. Taller than you. A gentler soul can't be found."

"So over six feet, and two hundred and fifty pounds?" he asked.

"About that."

Gilbert felt as if he was getting a break in the case.

"And is he . . . Lorna's age?" asked Gilbert. "Or closer to yours?"

"He's thirty-five."

"You wouldn't happen to know what kind of car he drives, would you?" he asked.

"No."

That covered specifics. Gilbert now went for background.

"So Trelawny got on well with Jason?" he asked.

"Not all the time," she said, "but generally, yes."

"Did you ever see any open animosity between them?"

"Once or twice. Trelawny thought Jason should come home and look after his two sons. They argued about that."

"And Jason left here at what time last night?" asked Gilbert.

"At five in the morning. He likes to get back to Scarborough in time for a shower and breakfast before he heads off to school."

For now, he had at least one suspect, Trelawny Holmes.

He thanked Gabby for her time, told her he might have to question her again, then went back to headquarters to make a stab at identifying Trelawny Holmes through any prior arrests the man might have had.

As it turned out, Trelawny Holmes was a thirty-five-year-old janitor who worked at the Scarborough Town Center shopping mall. His record included three counts of aggravated assault and a number of smaller violations. Gilbert thought this might be their man. Height and weight matched Gabby's description, which in turn matched their witness's description. The photograph on his computer screen showed a black man with copper-toned skin, broad cheekbones, a pronounced brow, a thick neck, and a high forehead. Holmes lived on Old Finch Road, around the corner from Lorna Morrell. Significantly, the photograph showed a goat's head

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amulet around the man's neck.

He downloaded the record into his case file and was just about to check the Ministry of Transportation search program to find out what kind of car Holmes drove when Joe Lombardo entered the squad room carrying a big brown envelope.

"Guess what I've got," said Lombardo.

"What?" said Gilbert.

"I've done some digging on the Morrell case," he said. Lombardo withdrew the contents of the envelope—five sheets stapled together—and put them on Gilbert's desk. "This is a copy of Morrell's life-insurance policy. He increased his coverage by three hundred thousand dollars just two weeks ago. The sole beneficiary is Lorna Morrell. It's not a smoking gun, but it's definitely something worth looking into."

Gilbert glanced over the policy, then pointed to his computer screen.

"And look at this," he said. "Here's a picture of Lorna's boyfriend, Trelawny Holmes. Gabby told me about him. His height and weight match our witness description. See what he's wearing around his neck?"

Lombardo had a closer look. "You're kidding," he said.

"I was just going to find out what kind of car he drove," said Gilbert.

"Let's do it," said Lombardo.

Gilbert minimized his current windows and accessed the MTO database through the headquarters' intranet. Using the search parameters of Trelawny's name and address, he easily pinpointed the vehicle the man drove: a beige, 2001, four-door Chevrolet Impala.

"Bingo," said Gilbert.

While Lombardo drove to the big man's home on Old Finch Road to see if he could surprise Holmes there, Gilbert tried Scarborough Town Center, a suburban mall off Highway 401, where, as the file indicated, Holmes worked as a janitor.

Gilbert parked his car, went into the mall, and looked around.

He found Holmes in front of the Rainforest Cafe. A huge aquarium formed a thousand-gallon archway over the entrance to the cafe, and big tropical fish swam placidly around inside, as bright as the colors of an impressionist painting. The sound effects of a tropical thunderstorm emanated from within the Amazon-themed restaurant, and Gilbert glimpsed a white-shirted waiter walking by with a tray of fruity drinks.

"Trelawny Holmes?" said Gilbert.

The big man looked up. "I'm Trelawny," he said.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Barry Gilbert of Metro Homicide," he said, and showed Holmes his badge and ID. "Could we talk?"

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Holmes, dressed in working blues, a nametag stitched to his shirt, took off his gloves and wiped his brow with the back of his arm.

"What's this about?" he asked, his voice deep, full, West Indian.

Gilbert told him what he had.

"And when you put it all together, not only do you have motive—the extra coverage Jason put on his life-insurance policy two weeks ago—but you also had opportunity. You know he's down there Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights."

Holmes studied Gilbert quietly for a few seconds. "I was nowhere near Regent Park last night," he said. "I was at home watching the basketball game."

"Was anybody watching it with you?" asked Gilbert.

"No."

"Did anybody telephone you while you were watching the game?"

"No. I always take my phone off the hook when I watch the game."

"So no one can verify that you were at home watching the game?"

A crease came to Holmes's brow.

"I'm Jason's friend," he said. "I've been his friend for nineteen years."

"Gabby says you fight."

Holmes sighed. "I don't deny it," he said. "We have our differences. But that's only because I'm trying to knock some sense into him. How's Lorna supposed to raise those boys on only half a paycheck?" Gilbert guessed half of Morrell's paycheck went to Gabby, but Holmes set him straight the next moment. "Jason . . . he cares more about that school back home than he does about his own two sons."

Gilbert paused. Here was another mention of that school. He had to check this out. He played dumb. "What school?" he asked, scratching around for more information.

"This school he used to work at back home, a little private one up in the mountains, Sanderson School. It's the only school around for miles and miles. It was going to close. Jason was always sending half his paycheck down there to keep it open. He doesn't care how Lorna has to make ends meet. She's always scrambling to make the mortgage payments. I don't make much at this job, but I give her what I can. I'm always at Jason to give her more, and sometimes we fight about it. I told him he should try to raise money at our church. I'm smart. I think things through. I try to come up with solutions. I had to fight him a bit—he doesn't like taking money from anybody—but he finally took my advice. He raised some money at the church for the school."

Gilbert thought about this. Certainly keeping a school open was a noble enough goal. But the money from the church might yet be

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a new factor. He pecked a bit more.

"So the church was receptive?" he asked.

"Our church has good people," said Holmes. "They give what they can."

"Did Jason say how much money was raised?" asked Gilbert.

Holmes shrugged. "Around twenty thousand," he said.

"And does anybody have any idea where that money is now?" asked Gilbert.

Holmes shrugged, looking as if he were just now considering the money's whereabouts. Either that, or he was bluffing. "Ask the church," he said. "They might know."

Gilbert phoned Minister Milroy Johnston at Keeper of the Faith Seventh Day Adventist Church the next day.

"I believe the figure was twenty-two thousand dollars," said Johnston. "The congregation opened their hearts, Detective. And their wallets."

Gilbert jotted the figure down.

"And do you have any idea where the money is now?" he asked.

Johnston paused. "I assume he sent it to Sanderson School already."

When Gilbert got off the phone, he pondered the money. Twenty-two thousand dollars—money over and above the extra life-insurance money—cash both Lorna Morrell and Trelawny Holmes might find tempting. If he could trace the church money back to the pair, he would be that much closer to an arrest.

He phoned the headmaster at Sanderson School in Brown's Town, Jamaica.

Much to his surprise, he learned the school had received not twenty-two thousand dollars, but sixty-six thousand dollars. This just made matters more perplexing.

"Any idea who the donor is?" he asked the headmaster.

"The donor wishes to remain anonymous," said the headmaster. "Not even I know who the donor is."

"But the money originated in Canada?" asked Gilbert.

"I believe so," said the headmaster. "A Toronto bank administered the funds."

Once he got off the phone, Gilbert tried to figure it out.

Who in Toronto but Morrell would send money to Sanderson School? But why was the figure now sixty-six thousand instead of twenty-two? He thought of the gang jewelry in Morrell's hand. Was that the connection? Gang involvement? Gangs meant drugs. Had Morrell tripled the amount by selling drugs? And did this mean the murder was indeed gang-related?

When Gilbert explained things to Lombardo, Joe's eyes lit up.

"I broadened my canvass in Regent Park," said the young detec-

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tive. "I found a small-time punk who told me Gabby has an older brother back in Jamaica, a guy named Trevor Sheridan. He's a player, Barry. A big one. He has connections to the Ramayá cartel in Colombia. He runs an airstrip outside Ochos Rios on the north coast of Jamaica. I phoned the authorities at the Jamaican Constabulary in Kingston. They tell me they've had their eye on Trevor for a long time. Morrell could easily turn twenty-two thousand dollars into sixty-six if the product was sourced directly from Colombia."

Gilbert went back to Regent Park to talk to Gabby again.

He found her in the laundry room downstairs folding towels. She looked up in mild surprise. Michael played with a toy truck on the floor. Judith clutched a doll in a playpen.

Gilbert spelled it out for her.

"We can't help thinking your brother might have played a role," he said.

Her shoulders sagged, and she stopped folding towels. She was so far gone in her grief, so exhausted by it, she was willing to give it up now. Still, he gave her a final push.

"I know you loved Jason, Gabby," he continued. "And I know you miss him. But if we're going to find his killer, you're going to have to help us. You have to tell us what happened." He leaned against a washing machine, taking the weight off his arthritic knees. "Sanderson School now has a sixty-six-thousand-dollar endowment. The donor was anonymous, but the money originated in Toronto. If your brother were to . . . help . . . or at least facilitate . . . you see why I'm so concerned about this, Gabby. That school got that money from somewhere."

Gabby's gaze shifted to the laundry-room window, where cold March rain streaked the dirty glass.

"My brother and I don't speak," she said at last. "He has his life, and I have mine. I don't approve of what he does." She looked at her feet, as if she now couldn't face him. "But in this one instance . . ." Her eyes misted over. "Jason was a good man." Her hands collapsed to her sides. "Education was his life." She looked up at him now, her eyes big, the color of dark chocolate. "And that school . . . it's not much of a school . . . just a brick building and a dirt playground in a small rural community up in the mountains . . . but it meant something to him. He believed in it. You don't meet a man who believes so strongly in something like that often." She cast an anxious glance at Judith. "So I helped him." Her voice grew tremulous. "And now I guess I have to pay the price."

He paused. Was there any way out for her? He didn't think so. She looked at him, as if hoping he might throw her a lifeline. But he couldn't.

"What's going to happen to me?" she asked.

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A gust of wind blew a particularly viscous rain squall against the window.

"Some other detectives will have to . . . you know . . . they'll have to question you about this . . . business with your brother," he said. "Right now, I'm more interested in Jason's killer. We found a goat's head amulet in Jason's hand. You had gang help up here?" he asked.

She took a couple of deep breaths. "Are you going to take my babies away?" she asked.

He couldn't answer that. "Your cooperation at this point will really go a long way," he said.

Her eyes grew misty with trepidation, and she finally dipped her chin a few times in acquiescence.

"I had to give . . . Jason something he could grab on to," she said, her voice halting and slow. "I had to give him something he could—because he was sinking so fast. I never knew it could get so bad." She looked at Gilbert, her eyes bright, pleading, as if she were trying to find a much-needed sign of understanding in his face. "His illness. All those pills the doctor gave him . . . they didn't help at all. When he got the news that Sanderson School was going to close, that was the last straw. It did something to him. It drained his spirit. I couldn't stand to see him so low. So I decided I had to do something. I had to save that school."

Gilbert glanced at the laundry room's exhaust fan. A coating of gray lint covered the fan.

"So you helped him?" he said.

She hesitated. "I'm scared," she said. "Of Richard Benson."

"Richard Benson." The name was familiar, and in a moment it clicked: Detective Bob Bannatyne, his colleague, had a posting on this known Jamaican gang member for the murder of a low-level Ross Park drug dealer, Miguel Diaz. A goat's head amulet had been found in Diaz's hand. "Richard Benson is his killer?" he asked.

She nodded. "He's going to kill me now," she said. Tears brimmed in her eyes. "He's going to kill my babies. I'm trapped."

"You're not trapped," he said. "You can turn to the police."

"I was just trying to help," she said. "I wanted to save my man."

"We'll protect you from Benson," he said.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "He said he would hurt my children."

"We won't let that happen."

She shook her head. "He said he would . . . you know . . . kill them. And that's why I couldn't . . . tell you . . . about the partnership we had."

"You, Jason, and Richard?"

"Yes," she said.

Gilbert thought of the witness description.

"Richard's Jamaican, isn't he?"

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"Yes."

"And he's a big guy, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what kind of car he drives?" asked Gilbert.

"A big old white car," she said. "I don't know what kind it is."

Bingo, Gilbert thought again. "So this partnership," he said.

Gabby glanced at Michael, who was now driving his toy truck around the table leg.

"We all went in together," said Gabby. "We used Jason's church money to buy what we could from my brother. Then Richard turned around and sold it up here. We didn't know it was worth so much up here. Jason was like a . . . a silent partner. The church money and so forth—he didn't want it getting back to Keeper of the Faith. Richard thought he was doing most of the work. He wanted to cut Jason out. I pleaded with Richard, but he said he was going to cut Jason out no matter what."

"So did you warn Jason?" asked Gilbert.

"I warned him again and again," said Gabby. In a softer, more resigned voice she said, "But I think . . . his sickness . . . he didn't care by then."

Gilbert thought of the extra money on the life-insurance policy. Dealing with dangerous people might have been Jason's rationale for beefing it up. Then again, if Richard hadn't done the job, Jason most probably would have done it himself. And that could have been his rationale as well.

"So Richard went after him?" he asked.

"Yes." Her tears came faster. "He said if I told anyone, he would come for my babies. So I just had to take it. I didn't want him killing my beautiful children."

Gilbert saw a mouse scurry behind one of the washing machines.

"What about the money?" he asked. "Did you get a share?"

She shook her head woefully. "Richard took my money away," she said. "I didn't get one red cent."

When Gilbert got back to headquarters, he checked with Bob Bannatyne about the Miguel Diaz homicide.

"We've got an outstanding warrant on Richard Benson for that," said Bannatyne. "We've got a witness who's willing to come forward. But there's no sign of Benson anywhere. Patrol's been after him for months."

"Were any slugs recovered at the scene?" asked Gilbert.

"Yes."

Gilbert called Dan Murphy, in Ballistics.

"I'm wondering about the slugs from the Morrell murder," he asked the veteran firearms expert. "Is the comparison nearly

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finished?"

"It's going to take awhile, Barry," said Dan. "Do you have any idea how many slugs we have on file up here?"

"Try matching the Morrell slugs to the Miguel Diaz slugs," said Gilbert.

An hour later, Murphy called him back.

"We've got a match," he told Gilbert.

Gilbert's shoulders sank in relief. His case was now airtight. He could write a viable warrant on Benson.

"Thanks, Dan," he said. "You've just made my day."

When Patrol learned Benson was wanted not only for the murder of Miguel Diaz, but also for killing Jason Morrell, a well-liked, admired, and respected high-school teacher, they redoubled their efforts to apprehend him.

Devon Lewis, from Narcotics, phoned Gilbert with a tip.

"One of my reliable sources says he's staying with a friend in the Jane-Finch Corridor."

Gilbert relayed this information to Patrol.

Patrol had Benson arrested within the week.

The arrest happened one evening while Gilbert and Lombardo were having a drink at their favorite English-style pub, the Duke of York. The two detectives watched the arrest on the pub's TV.

The whole thing was shot from the vantage point of the CFTO News helicopter.

Benson climbed a fence into a residential backyard. A uniformed police officer in a bulletproof vest ran around the side of the house and cut him off. The officer raised his firearm. Benson hesitated, looked around, but finally surrendered.

Lombardo raised his beer glass. "Cheers," he said.

Gilbert raised his own glass. "Cheers," he said, but he felt anything but jubilant.

Lombardo peered at him. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Gilbert took a sip of his beer. "You heard they arrested Gabby Sheridan?" he said. "They tracked the Sanderson School endowment back to her. She was lying to us. She got a share after all, and that's what she did with her money."

Lombardo nodded somberly. "Devon mentioned it to me," he said. "I feel sorry for her kids."

"The Jamaican Constabulary confiscated the money as evidence. The school's not going to get it now. And that makes this whole thing really sad."

The two detectives parted company a short while later. Gilbert, picking up a newspaper first, drove home in the family Windstar.

He glanced at the paper as he waited for a red light. He found a

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small story about Gabby on the first page. Drug busts usually didn't make the first page. But because all her drug profits went to Sanderson School, this bust was noteworthy.

He shook his head as the light changed to green. He drove through the rain. He didn't feel good about this one. Her babies. What would happen to them now? You couldn't make good out of bad, but Gabby had certainly given it her best shot. Still, the school was no better off, Jason was dead, and Gabby was facing prison time. Plus a lot of kids in Toronto now had drugs they otherwise wouldn't have had. He flicked the windshield wipers on high—the rain was really coming down hard now. He wondered why he did this for a living. Sometimes a murder investigation was nothing more than wading through a bunch of broken lives. He turned left on Broadview. He eased his foot on the brake as a streetcar pulled out of the Broadview roundabout. The streetcar dinged its bell a few times, thanking him. He continued up the street. Sometimes the satisfaction was barely there. An empty garbage can blew out onto the road and he swerved to avoid it. Jason, Gabby, Sanderson School, and maybe even Gabby's children—all going down the drain. Sometimes this job was too much.

But then he thought of Benson.

Benson was off the street.

Gilbert hadn't stopped Jason's murder. But Benson wouldn't shoot another Jason—another respected high-school teacher—anytime soon.

That, at least, was some good to come from all this bad. A grim consolation that made—just maybe—wading through a bunch of broken lives worth it after all. ●

Sonnet From the Pen of a Mug
by Will Ryan

Because I ain't got nuttin' much ta do
But lie aroun' all day an' try ta think,
I figgered I wud write a woid or two
'Bout hows I come t' end up in da clink.
"Insurance" is da biz what is my line;
Da boss, he sells protection for a fee.
When clients don't cough up dey pays a fine,
Which is, name-ully: dey has ta deal wit' me.
Now ya meets a lotta people, which is nice,
Da dough ain't bad, de hours is okay.
But whilst beatin' up some plainclothes fink from Vice,
He objected ta my woik an' said I'd pay.
So beware of undercover snitches, see?
Or you'll end up writin' poetry . . . like me.

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ETERNALLY

by Martin Edwards

In 2002, the British publisher Allison and Busby brought out a new legal/psychological thriller by Liverpudlian Martin Edwards. As in his series books featuring Harry Devlin, the new book's protagonist is a lawyer, but this time a lawyer turned writer, like the author himself. Mr. Edwards is also one of the leading anthologists and editors in our field. We're pleased to welcome him back with this tale filled with nostalgia. †

Playing for time, I said, "All that happened a long time ago."

"I'd love you to tell me about it," Alice said, putting down her notes and leaning over my bed.

Her perfume was discreet, the faintest hint of sandalwood. If only I were a few years younger. Well, quite a lot of years. I doubted she was even thirty-five and already she'd carved out separate reputations, first as an investigative journalist with the *Washington Post,* more recently as the author of a couple of bestsellers about Hollywood glitterati. She was shrewd and determined. Unwilling to take no for an answer. Exciting in any woman.

I started to cough. A passing nurse paused, but I nodded her away. Alice bent closer to me and I muttered, "You don't want to listen to a sick old man talking about the past."

"It took me a long time to find you." Wagging a slim finger. "Hard work. At least the advance covered my flight to London."

"Why bother? You can write your book without interviewing me."

"I don't cut corners." A sweet grin. "Besides, I never shopped in Oxford Street before."

"You haven't missed much."

"Also, I'd like to hear what you have to say."

I sucked in air: not as easy as it used to be. "You said a few minutes ago that you just love a good murder mystery. But you're wrong. Max didn't kill his wife. Is that good enough for you?"

The corners of her mouth curved down. The crestfallen expression made her look about nineteen; a man could easily be taken in by it and tell her more than it was safe to disclose.

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"You were his friend, of course you believed in him. But even at the time, there was gossip. Rumours that the accident was too convenient."

"Lorna was pretty, and she died young. It's the stuff that myths are made of." I made a show of stifling a yawn. "If she'd been a little more talented, a little brighter, people would still remember her name."

"Some people still do. That's why I have to mention her in my book."

"There isn't a story. She had too much to drink one evening, fell down the stairs of their Long Island mansion, and broke her pretty little neck."

Alice touched my hand, grazing the palm with her nails. I felt her warm breath on my cheek. "There is a story if her husband murdered her."

"You haven't done your homework. Max was innocent. He spent the evening with us. He'd never have had time to get over to the house and kill Lorna."

She didn't blink. "Trust me. I always do my research very thoroughly."

I burst into a racking cough and within a minute the nurse was pulling the curtains around my bed, shooing Alice away. I shut my eyes. I wasn't ready to step through death's door. I needed a little space, a little time, to decide what to say and do. Alice was so focused on making sure she got what she wanted.

In my mind, I saw Max again. A July afternoon in 'sixty-eight. The first time we had met since Lorna's death. He hadn't attended the funeral. Too sick, too eaten up with grief, so the story went. I sat in the front row at the church, not blinking, just remembering. There was an empty space beside me. Patty was still in shock after what had happened.

Max and I had been keeping our distance. He didn't call me, I didn't call him. When I showed up at his apartment on East 61st Street, unable to stay away any longer, I was shocked by the change in him.

He still dressed like Joe College. Plaid pants, baggy crew-neck sweater, white socks, and white US Keds. But his hair was different. Thick as ever, but with patches of grey that hadn't existed six months before. He kept glancing past me, as if any moment he expected Lorna's ghost to slink into the room.

"Thanks for coming," he said.

A smell of burnt toast hung in the air. At least it was better than cigarette smoke. The Colts and Packers were playing, but he switched off the set and started bustling in the kitchen. The refrigerator was packed to overflowing with lemons and Pepperidge

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Farm bread. He kept his gaze away from me as he threw raw eggs and coffee ice into the blender.

"How have you been?"

"Oh well, you know."

Silly question. I suppose we both must have felt nervous. Were my hands shaking, or is that just an illusion of memory? I kept quiet while he made the coffee milkshake and fiddled with cheese and chopped liver for a Dagwood sandwich.

A baby Steinway sat in an alcove. On the shelves lay half a dozen score pads scooped together with rubber bands. I hazarded a guess that all of the pages were blank.

"Written anything lately?" I asked.

"Not a note," he said. "You?"

"Uh-uh."

I sipped the milkshake. "So you and Chrissie aren't writing together at present?"

He stared at me. "I haven't seen Chrissie since Lorna died."

"I see."

"Do you?" His cheeks, pale until that moment, suffused with colour. "I don't think so. Everyone believes that they see. Truth is, they see what they want to see. Something bad."

I swallowed hard. "Hey, I'm sorry I didn't get in touch."

"Why should you have? I was the one who dumped you. Found another lyricist."

"I couldn't blame you. Chrissie's ten years younger and a thousand percent sexier than me."

"What you aren't saying is, she never wrote a hit song in her life."

I shrugged. "Fashions change. The stuff we wrote, it doesn't make the charts anymore. You were right, we needed a break from each other. Needed to freshen up."

"Lorna hated me for it. She told me you were worth ten of Chrissie. She was right, but what the hell? Sorry, Steve."

Awkwardly, he stretched out a hand and I shook it.

"People are whispering, aren't they?" he said quietly. Not meeting my eyes. Maybe he feared what he might see there.

"What do you mean?"

"C'mon, Steve. We've known each other a long time. We're old friends."

"The best," I said fervently. Despite everything, I meant it.

"Then tell me. Everyone thinks I killed Lorna, pushed her down those stairs. Isn't that the truth?"

"No." The flat denial startled him, made him catch his breath. "Okay, okay, there are one or two people who love to think the worst."

"More than one or two. Chrissie's among them. As usual, she

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flatters herself." He paused. "She's stupid enough to believe I killed Lorna, just to be free for her."

Next day, with Alice back at my bedside and fiddling with her tape recorder, I said, "I'm not sure Max and I deserve a chapter in your book. We were never Goffin and King, or Leiber and Stoller."

"You were different, you were a Brit."

"Who married a girl from Greenwich Village."

"She was a folk singer," Alice said, as if I didn't know. "How romantic."

"And I was a lyricist whose sole claim to fame was the words to a Cliff Richard B-side. Patty and I met in a club in Soho at the end of the 'fifties. I'd never met anyone quite like her. She was so lovely, so intense."

"You wrote songs with her?"

"At first. Not a good idea, we both realised in the end. You can't work with someone you're passionate about. She was a wannabe Joan Baez, but my heart belonged to Tin Pan Alley. After I followed her to New York, I had a couple of breaks, grabbed a short-term contract with Famous Music. It went from there."

A dreamy look came into her hazel eyes. "What was it like in those days, working in the Brill Building?"

"One thing it wasn't, was glamorous. Eleven floors of offices and every one housed a music publisher. Each company had its writers' rooms, stuffy cubicles with just enough room for a beat-up piano and a couple of chairs. The windows didn't open; it was hell working with a guy like Max who smoked nonstop." I coughed to make the point. "I ought to sue, don't you think? That place surely killed me."

"You all kept changing partners."

"Sure. I'd write with one guy in the morning, another in the afternoon. That's the way it worked. But there was something about Max's melodies. They seemed to make a better fit with the words I wrote. Bobby Vinton liked our songs, Jay and the Americans gave us a Top Thirty hit. It went on from there. Before long the two of us were a team."

"You met Lorna Key at a recording session, so the story goes."

"It's a true story," I said. "There was an Isley Brothers session and we had a song on the date. She was one of the girls singing in the background. You couldn't help but notice her. Even in pigtails and jeans, she was gorgeous. Her voice was raw; even as a kid she was a chain-smoker. Her lungs must have been in worse shape than Max's, but it wasn't her lungs that he was interested in. He said she had potential. Nice euphemism, huh? He wanted her to start recording our demos. I went along with it, even though I

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never cared much for her sound. Subtlety was never her strong point."

Alice glanced at her notebook. "Soon she signed with Kapp Records."

"Yeah, Lorna thought she'd become a star, but the truth is, Max pulled strings. They were married the week before her first single came out."

" 'Eternally.' " Alice smiled and crooned the chorus:

> "For as long as there's a deep blue sea,
> For as long as there's a you and me,
> I will love you eternally."

I shifted under the bedclothes. "I never claimed to be William Shakespeare."

She glanced over her shoulder, caught the puzzled frown of the nurse walking into the ward. In the bed opposite, old Arthur gave a toothless grin and tried to mime applause with his wasted hands.

"It has a hook," she said. "I've been humming the blessed thing all day. Can't seem to get it out of my head."

"Ah, the potency of cheap music."

"Lorna's voice was stronger than mine."

"She belted it out," I agreed. "Though that wasn't what it called for. 'Eternally' is a tender love song. But Lorna, she didn't do tenderness. You talk about murder. Well, she murdered 'Eternally.' It was always a favourite of mine. For once, the words came before the music. I'd written it for Patty, a token of our love."

"I like the melody," she said. Not altogether tactfully.

"Max was a smart writer. He'd switch time signatures, come up with ten-and-a-half-bar phrases, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Lorna couldn't handle it. She'd stumble over the tricky bits; we did a dozen takes and then settled for the second. I thought it was lousy, kept asking how you can rasp a love song, but Max said it was wonderful."

"He was besotted with her."

"That's what people forget. And you know something? He was proved right. That song went straight into the charts at number twenty-nine. Almost made it to the Top Ten. Lorna Key never had a bigger record."

"The publicity must have helped. Her marrying the composer."

"Sure, the press lapped it up."

"Did you resent that? Max was always the one in the public eye, not you. Radio announcers used to talk about Max Heller songs, forget they were written by Heller and Jackson."

I shook my head. "He liked the attention more than I did. You know, Sammy Cahn once said that most songwriters look like den-

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tists, but Max was an exception. He was handsome and talented and even if his wife wasn't exactly Barbra Streisand, who cared? They made a good-looking couple. So while Patty and I got on with our lives, Max and Lorna kept the scribes busy and our songs benefited. I guess they got more exposure than they deserved."

"For a while," she said gently.

"Nothing is forever," I admitted. "Flower power came and went. Then there was heavy metal. All of a sudden it seemed that the songs Max and I were writing belonged to a bygone age. There was talk of a TV series, with Lorna and Rick Nelson, but Rick's career was in a tailspin and it all came to nothing."

"And then you and Max split up."

"It was no one's fault," I insisted, propping myself up in the bed. I shouldn't be talking so much; the nurse would scold me for tiring myself out. But what did it matter? "Except perhaps it was my fault, for going down with pneumonia at the wrong time. Max and I had been asked to write a couple of numbers for a TV special. I got sick and finished up in hospital. The deadline was forty-eight hours away, so the television company asked Max to work with Chrissie Goldmark. They hit it off straightaway. The songs they wrote were candy floss, but by the time I'd recovered, they were talking to Specter about producing a new album together. Not for Lorna, though."

"Lorna didn't take that well, did she?"

"Could you blame her? Chrissie fancied Max, and like all men, he was susceptible to flattery from a pretty girl."

Alice leaned close again. I supposed it was a trick of hers, a ploy to use when talking to men. A habit, almost. "Were Max and Chrissie lovers?"

"What do you think?" Playing for time again.

"Everyone I've spoken to believes the two of them had something going."

"Maybe they did. So what? It doesn't make Max a murderer."

"Lorna was an emotional woman."

"Emotional woman? Tautology, Alice."

She wouldn't be riled. "Lorna was tempestuous. Her career was fading and she hated that. She must have realised her looks wouldn't last forever. She was smoking eighty a day; her whole life was burning up. Losing her husband to a second-rate wordsmith would have been the last straw. I bet she wanted revenge. Hell hath no fury, you know. Maybe she threatened him with divorce, bad publicity . . ."

"Max never stopped caring for her. Besides, he wasn't a violent man." Suddenly I felt very tired. Reaching back into the past was draining the life from me.

"Anyone can snap," Alice said softly.

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How could I deny it? Clearing the phlegm from my throat, I said, "Max didn't."

"Your loyalty does you credit," she said as I closed my eyes. "But how can you be sure?"

"You're torturing yourself," I told Max. "And for no reason."

"I don't have an alibi, you know. I was hanging out here on my own while Lorna was in the house on Long Island. We'd had a fight. No point in lying to you, it was over Chrissie."

I checked my fingernails. "She accused you of having an affair?"

"Yeah, the morning she died. It wasn't an accusation, just a statement of fact. I didn't try too hard to deny it. She asked if I wanted a divorce. If so, she was willing to agree. She didn't intend to spend the rest of her life with someone who had fallen out of love with her. I said I didn't want to rush things and she made a coarse remark and things kind of went downhill from there. You know how it is."

"So you came back here, to your old bachelor pad."

"Lucky I kept it on, huh? I haven't had the heart to spend time on Long Island ever since she tumbled down that staircase. Fact is, I could have gone back and killed her, made it look like an accident after she'd been drinking. Which she'd been doing too much. The house is quiet, no one would have seen me come and go. Who's to say I'm innocent?"

He leaned back and the kitchen stool wobbled dangerously beneath him. The sink was piled high with dirty dishes; there were coffee cups filled with day-old instant Yuban. Looking out onto the terrace, I could see rumpled beach towels and grubby squeezed-out tubes of Bain de Soleil.

Following my gaze, he said, "I've not been in the mood for tidying."

"It won't do, Max."

"Said like a true Englishman. Sorry for falling short in the stiff-upper-lip department, but the truth is, I'm pretty pissed about all this. All of a sudden, nobody wants to know me. Not even the woman I'm supposed to have committed murder for."

"You're right," I said suddenly. "If you had an alibi, the tongues would stop wagging. You could start your life over."

"Pity I screwed up by not having Chrissie round that night."

"Where was she?"

"Jiving at some nightclub. Not my scene. I suppose I was already realising she was a bad habit, one I ought to break. I was supposed to be working on a song, but I had a couple of beers, then a couple more. Before I knew what was happening, I was fast asleep. And then the next morning came the cops, knocking on my door to break the news."

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"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Like what?"

"Patty and I called round here that night," I said calmly. "It would have been about eight. She'd persuaded me to make an attempt to bury the hatchet."

He stared at me. "What are you talking about?"

"Patty thought you and I made a good team. She's always been fond of you."

"No, she hasn't."

"It's Lorna she didn't like." I sighed. "Trouble was, you and I argued. We'd both had a few beers. I took a swing at you and missed. Patty decided it was time for us to go. Not long after nine o'clock; she checked her watch. By then, you weren't in a fit state to go anywhere, and anyway, according to what I've heard, the authorities are convinced Lorna was already dead."

His face was stripped of expression. I guessed he was calculating pros and cons. That was Max: He always played the percentages.

"Are you serious about this?"

"Never more so."

"We don't have to drag Patty into this."

I noticed the "we." Progress. "Yes, we do. After all this time, we need to make it look credible. People might think I was simply trying to save my old partner's good name if I was the only one giving him an alibi. Trust me, Patty and I have been tossing it around for a few days now. She agrees it's for the best."

He rubbed his chin. "I don't know, Steve."

"Yes, you do. It's the only way. I'll put the word around that I've only just got wind that people are seriously pointing the finger at you. You and I may not be working together anymore, but I'm keen to set the record straight."

"But . . ."

"No buts. You want to spend the rest of your life like some pariah? Think about it."

I could imagine his mind working, testing my proposition, checking it for flaws. Of course he would go along with it in the end. He had no choice, if Lorna was not to destroy his life the way she'd almost destroyed mine.

Lorna, Lorna, Lorna. I can still smell the gin on her breath the last time we were together. Still hear her striking the match to light yet another Lucky Strike from the crumpled pack. Still see her cupping her hands over the sudden flame. Still see her flicking ash all over the imitation Versailles rug. She was just waiting for me to call her a slut, but I said nothing, let her scorn wash over me like breakers on the shore. Even now I cringe at the memory of

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the coarse words, all the more shocking because they came from a scarlet mouth as cute as a bow-ribbon on a candy box.

"So how are you today?" asked Alice as she set up the tape recorder.

I made a slight movement with my shoulders. The doctor had talked to me that morning. There wasn't much time left.

"You're flying back home tonight?"

"Uh-huh." She studied me. "I just want to say thanks for all your help. It can't be easy for you, reliving the past when you aren't well."

"Those were the best years of my life," I said. "It's no hardship to bring them back to mind. You know, I never had another Top Thirty hit after the spring of 'sixty-seven. Thank God for Muzak. The royalties never stopped dribbling in, enough to keep Patty and me fed and watered."

"What happened to her career?"

"Same as happened to mine, I guess." I sighed, spoke almost to myself. "Doesn't matter, it's been a good marriage these past forty-odd years."

"She's coming to see you again this afternoon?"

"Never fails. The arthritis gives her hell, but she fights through the pain."

"Did you stay in touch with Max?"

"Not really. We bumped into each other now and then. Last time I saw him must have been in the early 'seventies, just before he was killed in that plane crash."

"You never wrote another song together after Lorna died?"

"No, things never seemed to jell. Our time had passed."

"So why did you alibi him for Lorna's death?"

Her voice had never sounded so sharp before. I flinched under her laser stare. "I told you before," I said. "He didn't kill her."

"Maybe he didn't," she said. "Maybe someone else did."

All of a sudden, I felt very cold. "What do you mean?"

"I talked to Lorna's best friend. After all these years, she's broken her silence, as the saying goes."

"And?" My voice was no more than a croak.

"Lorna confided in her. Max's affair pissed her off. So she decided to take revenge by bedding you. Dear, dependable, happily-married Steve. It helped prove how irresistible she was."

"Girls talking," I said. "It doesn't mean a thing."

She bent over me again. "Did she taunt you? Or threaten your security? Maybe it was that. Perhaps she said she would spill the beans. You couldn't risk having Patty find out the truth. Was that why you shoved her down the stairs?"

"No," I whispered. "No, no, no."

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Lorna, Lorna, Lorna. The contempt in her glazed eyes that last time, when I told her life wasn't like writing songs. You can't keep changing partners. Nicotine-stained fingers jabbed into my gut as she told me to get out. No one ever dumped her, she said, no one. And certainly not a two-bit rhymester like Steve Jackson.

I could have killed her right then. Oh God, how I wanted to.

Patty arrived an hour later. All the time I've been in this place, she's never missed a day. Her love for me has never skipped a beat. She's been so faithful.

When I'd finished telling her about my conversations with Alice and the doctor, she took my hand. Hers was knobbly, deformed by the disease in her joints. I closed my eyes, recalling the smoothness of her skin when she was twenty-one.

"So she has her scoop, something to help sell her book? Lorna Key wasn't killed by her husband but by her lover, Steve Jackson?"

"By the time she publishes, I'll be dead and buried. She's made sure of that by taking a good look at me and having a few words with the doctor. No need for her to worry. A corpse can't sue for libel."

Patty squeezed my hand tighter. "I won't let her do it. I won't let you do it."

"Don't be silly."

"It doesn't matter now. I may be losing you, but not for long. I still have those pills I told you about. You must tell her the truth."

"Why me?"

"You're the one who always had a way with words."

"Lorna deserved to die."

"No, she didn't," Patty said. "I was just a jealous bitch who killed another woman because I was afraid she'd wreck our marriage."

Funny, she'd never talked about it before. And I'd never asked; there was no need. I'd guessed her secret as soon as she came home that night, the stench of Lorna's Lucky Strikes clinging to her clothes, to her hair, to her skin. She'd never meant it to happen, I always told myself. Lorna was just killed by an unlucky strike.

"She didn't succeed, did she?"

She kissed me lightly on the cheek. "No, darling. No one could ever tear us apart."

So there it is, Alice. How wrong you were. This isn't a murder mystery at all. It's just like one of those trite old lyrics of mine, you see. A tearjerker, a heartbreaker. A story about love. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE FOREST FORGE

by Beatrix M. Kramlovsky

Translated from the German by Mary Tannert and Beatrix M. Kramlovsky

The clear light was like a promise, magic in its tenderness. Decades ago she would have loved it, sure of a bright future. But all that was past.

Her swollen feet carried her to the kitchen window. She looked over the garden, her fields. The freshly planted pear trees did nothing to soften her anger; they merely added fuel to her mean-spirited moaning about the mistakes of the young. She wasn't able to admit, even to herself, that when she had ordered it long ago, in her harshest voice, she was enthusiastic about the felling of her eighty-four cider-apple trees. And now, as a chorus of humming arose from the season's first swarm of bees, hungry after the long winter, it was as if she were hearing the noise of the cider fermenting, the whispering and bubbling of the barrels. Disgusted, she shut the window with an emphatic bang.

The telephone rang. She shuffled slowly to the table, shooed the cat from the armchair, and picked up the receiver. An unfamiliar voice trickled into her ear, adding to her indignation, and she was on the point of hanging up when a question made her pause, make connections, draw upon memory to produce the correct face.

Author of five books (two crime novels, a drama, a surreal novel, and a collection of stories), Austrian Beatrix Kramlovsky had an artistic profession prior to writing. She began drawing and painting at the age of three and became an exhibited artist (despite a prohibition against the display of her work) during the several years in which she and her husband lived in East Berlin. Since the family's return to Austria in 1991, she has worked as an artist, writer, and teacher.

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Wasn't he ashamed of himself after all this time? That little boy, sweet and far too loud, his dirty soft fingers in her hand . . .

But that would be fine, she told him, the door was never locked during the day, he should just make sure he was loud when he came in so that he didn't startle her. What did he want, anyway?

His long-winded answer coaxed only a brittle bark from her. Not the deep, gobbling horse-laugh that had been her trademark for decades in those parts. Recording local history, he explained. Tracking their cultural heritage. A scientific inventory. Oh, these promising young men! Once he had been her favorite grandnephew, but he was a child no more.

She made her way laboriously down to the cellar to get a bottle and decant it in good time.

Wine to praise the Lord. Cider is for thirst and for closing a deal with the farmers. Remember that, Gussie.

Yes, Father, she had said. She was a good child.

She cut bread, set the table. From her kitchen window she could see the foothills of the Alps. It was spring, and behind the worn green of last year's growth on the firs, the grayish-brown face of the cliff was visible. Its shadowy trenches were full of dark water now from the snow that had melted only a few days ago. Father had always called the rushing of the spring brooks his personal symphony of fate, and then Mother would laugh holes in his enthusiasm and pull him quickly back to reality. Water had monetary value, and a merchant had enough to do without getting lost in romantic fancies.

She crosshatched the butter and, hands trembling, cut slices of smoked pork that were much too thick. Would he be very hungry? Students always used to be hungry. All men were. Astonishing amounts of food were consumed at the legendary feasts at her office. But those feasts were good for her deals with the livestock traders and the traveling salesmen. People didn't do business like that anymore. Today, an illuminated Spar supermarket sign hung over the door of her former office, and the many farm children who used to turn up every day in front of the round glass candy jars had become gray-haired adults who tried vainly to revive dead traditions against the will of an uncomprehending youth—adults who had succeeded brilliantly in forgetting the parts they played in building up Hitler's Reich.

Since then, the countryside had changed, too. A half-million fruit trees had disappeared to free large swaths of land for new highways. It was a countryside cut into pieces so that people could move through it quickly, get ahead, get away. It was only in the dark valleys that the tempo had stayed the same. Making them reservations for childhood memories, the territory of fatherly dreams:

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Gussie, tell me the capacity of the mill in April after a long winter, in a dry July. What's the right mixture of metals for a swing knife, a saw, a thin blade, a thicker one? How much profit is left when you have to pay an ironsmith, an apprentice, a temporary worker, when you've sold this many scythes, knives, and shovels?

They were arithmetic games, played to the backdrop of running water, the *clack-clack* of the mill wheel's paddles.

Pay attention, girl.

Yes, Father.

She grinned bitterly. Her mother had never understood why Augusta and her father were so fond of the mill noise, never realized that it was a kind of private room, a hidden stage for dreams and illusions. Mother, with her murderous talent to hurt with words.

When she ordered the felling of the cider-apple trees, her mother cried. It was not because Hitler wanted the cider gardens to disappear, as she justified it then, but to get back at her mother, who liked to compare their spreading splendor in spring to a priest's feast-day robes, a panorama of blossoms to honor God that transformed itself into cold hard cash in the fall. Every felled tree a future loss.

She glanced at the beautiful plates on the table and went to look for the right glasses. There weren't many pieces left from her wedding service. Oh, Karl! Did her nephew have any image at all of his great-uncle? What had his parents told him? Family lies, she hoped. She shook her head gruffly. What was the point of grubbing around in the past? The forest forge would divulge no secrets, and in her memories Karl's face was just a pale yellow blur, indistinguishable under the clear eddies.

She looked out the window again. Father did not often allow her to accompany him on his deer hunts. Usually she had to stay close to the forge, even when hunting season wasn't officially open, but away from the water, away from the vortex. She played with stones and sticks, practiced on a Jew's harp that she always had with her, dreamed to the accompaniment of the ceaseless thumping. That was the best time at the forge, a time no one could take away from her, not her unhappy mother, and later, not even Karl. Once Father had returned he would take her with him to the nearest pub where she got to sit near him with her soft pretzel and her sweet cider, observing him silently, not unlike his favorite hunting dog.

Oh! The young man had arrived! She watched as he got out of the car. The clothing that muffled the contours of his body could not disguise the familiar shape, the family resemblance. She noticed that she had begun to cry. Ageing was a punishment. What quick gestures he had! His strong voice sounded like a poem that she

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had forgotten long ago. It was not the words, it was his youth, his power, his joy. His certain knowledge of a future lying ahead.

She listened to him, watched the way he angled the corners of the bread into his mouth, polished off huge amounts of smoked meat, and made notes continually even as the cassette player recorded their conversation.

"You really need to get the forge renovated," he said when they'd talked for a while, told little family anecdotes.

He had been there! Had poked around among the crumbling walls, inspected the decaying wood. The paddles had cracked, but some of the tools were still usable for display, at least after a professional cleaning, he told her. The region needed it. A beautiful spot. Great marketing possibilities. It roused her business sense, her curiosity. So had he lied about his thesis topic? No, but it was more than that. He was interested, yes, but so was the community. The forge directly adjoined a new hiking trail and lay at just the right distance to the next mill, the next restaurant. There were possibilities there. The valleys had to be innovative these days to survive, as far away from the highway as they were, and without the cider-apple trees. All of a sudden, it seemed like a virtue that time had stood still here.

"Were you there alone?"

He shook his head, and wanted to know why she hadn't looked after the place during the previous decades, why she'd let it go to ruin and still refused every offer for it. She didn't answer. He asked whether she could imagine what might come of developing it.

Again she heard the insistent *clack-clack* of the paddles and the mighty hammering echoing beneath the massive roof. Had her father ever suspected that Karl would try to take the forge away from her? Just to hurt her?

"Yes, I can imagine it. But aren't there enough ruins for the tourists?"

He smiled. Historic tourism was a big thing, and the area desperately needed every opportunity it could find to bring in money. Investing in the future. That was a language she could understand. She'd been an entrepreneur for decades. She remembered the sign on her former warehouse. Her name and her maiden name with a *née* in cursive. It looked so trustable. During the war and even afterwards it had protected her, put her above every suspicion, so that no one questioned her widowhood.

"By the way, we had to stop the water briefly to check the condition of the wheel. The millrace isn't really as decayed as you'd think. The mechanism still works."

She held her breath and looked directly into his eyes.

"And you know what we found?"

Time passed before her mind like a rushing flow, loud in her head.

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"Under the mill wheel—I mean, he must have jumped right into it—we found a skeleton. It's old and damaged and the clothes are in shreds. It must have been lying there for fifty years, the doctor said."

Karl.

"And the ethnologist thought it might be a good idea to integrate it as a tourist attraction—ghost of the mill, that kind of thing. If you don't have any objections, as the owner. Or think it's irreverent."

She started to laugh. At first it was just a tortured cough, right up in her throat. The boy looked up, startled. But then she felt it move lower, rumble in her still-mighty belly, and let loose, rolling out a trombone staccato just like years ago. Oh, Karl! You old skunk! You never could have imagined that they'd make money off you, you with your endless complaints about the financial loss! Especially right here, where all you could see was loss and hopelessness and the poverty of these dark valleys. The worries and troubles of the years between the wars. My troubles.

Her laughter broke new paths out of her body, rolled forth like thunder, wrapped itself around her dumbfounded visitor, and flickered through the room. It was a mighty echo of laughters of long ago, a great song about her past, her youth, her love, and, at long last, a fitting requiem. How surprisingly easy it had been to hit Karl and watch him fall down with his eyes wide open, not understanding anything. Now, after so many years, she had found the key to close the door on all those humiliations, fights, lost chances, and lies. A belly laugh. ●

The Perfect Knight
by Peggy Weed

Once lived a tall and gallant knight;
Yclept he was Sir Battledore.
He rescued maidens from their plight
As knights need must in times of yore.

His ebon locks to shoulders fall;
They match the color of his eyes.
Whene'er he storms a castle wall
His foe must always yield, and dies.

A maiden fair he loved and wooed;
He pledged to her his life and heart.
But Lady Madge rebuffed his suit,
Delcared that he should quick depart.

The reason for her cruel slight?
He was a dark and stormy knight.

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The Butler Couldn't Quite Do It

by William Bankier

A light-hearted tale this time from veteran short-story writer William Bankier. Shifting locales mid story, as he often—effectively—does, the Canadian-turned-Californian treats readers to a bizarre night at the Academy Awards. The range of subjects Mr. Bankier's short fiction covers is wide, but he often weaves in material relating to two of his special interests, jazz music and movies. ‡

"Come and work for me, Kincaid," Margo Fletcher said. Margo found it irksome that this slim, handsome man was in the employ of her best friend, Lucy Jellicoe.

He bent towards her now, offering a tray of anchovies on quartered toast, and said, furtively, "You tempt me, Mrs. Fletcher. And not for the first time."

Margo and Charles Kincaid remembered each other from their years together as members of the Hartfield Players, the leading amateur dramatic society in southwest London. Charles had played so many butlers in various productions on stage that his transition to the real-life occupation of servant seemed natural. Margo Fletcher, meanwhile, had opened a shop on Wimbledon High Street where intimate items of ladies' lingerie were offered for sale. Her partner in this enterprise was none other than Lucy Jellicoe, her school chum at Roedean in the green years long ago.

And now, here she was attempting to hijack Lucy's butler while enjoying a sunny afternoon on the Jellicoe patio. The cocktail party was in honor of Margo's recently announced trip to Los Angeles, California. She and her late husband's friend Desmond Wicklow would be traveling there to attend the Academy Awards ceremonies at which Wicklow's novel, *So Much for the Few,* had been nominated for an Oscar. More accurately, the motion picture based on the novel had been so nominated.

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Wicklow had written the book after retired squadron leader Calvin "Corky" Fletcher flew his privately owned Spitfire aircraft into one of the white cliffs of Dover. This happened during the filming of a BBC documentary about The Battle of Britain, and it left a nasty black smudge on one of the white cliffs.

Wicklow's thesis in the book had to do with the sad plight of Britain's war heroes who found themselves required to fly for wages to make a decent living. The premise was flawed in that Corky Fletcher would have flown his racy, camouflaged fighter plane anywhere at anytime for any reason at all. But Wicklow's book was a good read and it made a fine movie.

"If I speak to Lucy," Margo suggested, "and am able to persuade her to let you go, will you come with me?"

"Have I ever been able to refuse you?"

"I can recall late one evening following the cast party for *Present Laughter.*"

"We were great in *Present Laughter.*" The recollection of six curtain calls brought a wistful smile to the butler's handsome face.

"We could have been just as great in my car on the drive home."

"Feelings as powerful as ours," Kincaid intoned, "should not be confined to the backseat of a motor vehicle."

"You always know the right thing to say, darling. Now here comes Lucy. Buzz off while I tell her what I have in mind."

Like any writer, Desmond Wicklow had nothing much to recommend him other than his next idea. He put mousse on his black hair and parted it in the middle. His green eyes appeared sleepy behind gold-framed glasses which turned a rosy hue in outdoor light. He wore a grey Harris Tweed sports jacket with pale blue jeans and white tennis shoes.

"Want me to scarper so you can talk to Lucy?" he asked. After the butler departed with his tray of anchovy toast, Wicklow had taken his place. He downed his gin and tonic.

"Stay. You can help me persuade her."

"To do what?"

"We're ad-libbing, Desmond. The way actors do when they have to perform one of your scripts."

Lucy Jellicoe arrived, like the fog, on little cat feet. She carried a glass in both hands and raised it frequently as she spoke, punctuating her words with imperceptible sips of what might have been vodka but was, in fact, tonic water. Lucy had always supplied the timid counterpoint to Margo's flamboyance.

"There you are, Luce! Come and talk to me. Where have you been hiding?"

"It's my party, I can hide if I want to." Instead of sitting where her friend patted the settee cushion between herself and Desmond

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Wicklow, Lucy perched on a concrete mushoom. Her late parents, who died together in the crash of a skiers' gondola in the Italian Alps, had been into garden gnomes, some as large as female Olympic gymnasts.

"I want you to do something for me, Luce. You know all about my trip to California next week."

"Everybody does. We all hate you for it."

"I want you to give me Kincaid."

"He's not my slave."

"But you pay him. I don't want to pay him. I just want to take him with me. To look after things. My clothes and travel arrangements and the occasional meal in the hotel room. Things."

"You'd have to ask him."

"I took the liberty. He wants me to clear it with you." In the ensuing silence, Margo Fletcher reached out and squeezed the author's cheek. "Say something, Desmond."

"Yes. Very important Kincaid comes along. I'll be occupied full-time with press interviews and screenings. Poor Margo, she can't find her other shoe."

"Very good, Des. What say you, your Luceness?"

"I'll be all alone tending the shop."

"Only for a week or so. We'll be back before you know it."

"No you won't. You and Kincaid will jump on another airplane and fly off to Hawaii."

"Now there's an idea," Margo said.

The Los Angeles flight was like many a play Margo and Kincaid had starred in—interesting at first but too long by half. "Alone at last," Charles was able to say when the bellboy closed the hotel room door. He gave a nervous laugh. Kincaid had been a bank executive for many years before the bank merged and downsized. Thus wounded in spirit, he allowed himself to become a servant to a wealthy woman. Now he was finding it hard to become a man.

"Take me in your arms," Margo said.

The butler did as he was told. Some time later he said apologetically, "Jet lag, I'm afraid."

"You read me wrong, dear," Margo said, leaving him on the chaise longue with an encouraging kiss on the cheek. At the drinks table by the window high above Sunset Boulevard she said, "All I want is for you to be a handsome, happy man taking me places where other women will see us and envy me." She poured tiny bottles of whiskey into two glasses and carried them to where he sat looking at his hands placed on his knees. "If anything more should happen, all well and good. Cheers."

"Happy times, darling."

Margo tossed back her drink in one and set down the empty

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glass. When she could breathe again, she said, "Precisely my point. There may not be any happy times, for me, that is, unless I can do something about Desmond."

"About Desmond Wicklow?"

"Do something to him, I should have said. Kill him, probably."

"Kill Desmond? How?"

"How should I know?"

"But why?"

"To keep him from killing me."

It was Kincaid's turn to go to the window and open two more of the tiny bottles.

The Awards ceremony would take place at a venue called the Kodak Theatre. There would be acres of red carpet, semi-dressed actresses smiling all over their bodies, endless TV reporters saying the same thing to everybody. Margo had seen it on television and now she was here. It was all thanks to Desmond's book. His writing of it had driven her wild because of the excessive time he spent with pen and notebook instead of paying attention to her. Her on-and-off affair with the writer had begun before the untimely death of ace pilot Corky Fletcher. Lately, it seemed to be more trouble than it was worth. Margo Fletcher's needs were simple; she wanted everybody to anticipate her every wish and attend to it immediately.

"I don't ask much," she said to Kincaid in the limo on the way to the auditorium. Desmond Wicklow had gone to the affair in another car with studio executives who believed *So Much for the Few* was going to win an Oscar.

The butler was staring through the window at L.A. traffic. It frightened and depressed him. So did Margo's assignment. "I'm not sure I can do this thing."

"I only ask people to do what I know they can. That way, I avoid being refused. Which I hate."

"You're quite sure he wants to kill you."

"I told you, darling. I got it straight from Lucy Jellicoe. Desmond Wicklow has had this thing for me since before he wrote his book. He used to take me to a place on the Brighton Road called The Green Man. Corky found out about it." Margo put on a mournful face. "You thought the Spitfire hitting that cliff was an accident?"

"I and everyone else."

"It was suicide. My husband's way of telling me and Desmond, 'Take that!' "

"Horrible."

"Ghoulish. Look at the way Wicklow profited from the tragedy."

"I see your point."

"All the time he was writing his book, he was having his way with me. Said I was his muse."

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"The swine."

"He's been after me to marry him. But I don't love him, Charles. I love you."

"Oh Lord."

"I told Desmond. You should have seen his face. He said the famous words."

"If I can't have you, nobody will."

"The male mantra." Margo Fletcher took Kincaid's hand. "And he hinted he'll take care of you while he's at it."

There were great goings on before, during, and after the Academy Awards ceremonies. Charles Kincaid, with Margo Fletcher on his arm, found a microphone stuck in his face.

The reporter: "It's a great night for Hollywood, sir."

"Everyone seems quite jolly."

"You sound like one of the British contingent."

"Oh no, I'm just the butler."

"The butler? Then you did it!"

"Not yet. I'm not sure I can. How did you find out?"

When the nominations were called for best screenplay based on a published work, Desmond Wicklow, who had adapted his own book, got to his feet as soon as his name was read and began approaching the stage. Desmond had made a discovery in America. It was Tennessee sour-mash whiskey and he was determined to drink as much of it as he could. He was off to a good start.

"God bless him," Margo whispered in the shocked silence. "He's reached a new level in irrational behavior."

Desmond made his way up the carpeted steps and onto the stage while the presenters watched, fascinated. The inebriated author bore down on them, his crimson, sweaty face a mask of acquisitiveness as he said, "Don't just stand there. Give me my Oscar."

Now the audience, including the remaining four nominees, began to understand the moment. The applause and shouting was worthy of a sports event, which was appropriate because one of the presenters was "Slam" Duncan, star of the National Basketball Association. The other was Chucky-Joe Partridge. Chucky-Joe had become a Tinseltown icon two years ago by writing, directing, and acting in a film called *Down and Out in Pismo Beach.* Not only did he bring in his movie at a cost of a hundred thousand dollars, he won the Oscar for best screenplay.

These two stars, who were far from sober themselves, recognized an erratic brother-under-the-skin when they saw one. They embraced Wicklow from either side, turned him to the camera, and kissed him on both cheeks. It made a sensational photograph dominating the front page of the tabloids in the morning. "Limey Scribe Loses It," said one headline.

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This was true. Seated by security men, not sure where he was or what was happening, Wicklow and the world heard the award announced for, and saw it handed to, somebody else.

After the ceremony, at the largest and most lavish of the annual blowouts, Slam Duncan told reporters, "Ye dinna have to ridicule the wee mon. He only did what I do on the basketball floor, made a bloody fool of himself. It's no fair, is it. I get millions and he got nowt."

Duncan was telling the truth. The lone Scotsman in the NBA, he often appeared in a kilt and a bearskin hat. The direct descendant of Celtic monsters, he was permitted his eccentricities because he was eight feet tall. From this height, he was able to cruise close to the backboard and throw the ball down into the hoop. "Did ye see that?" he would yell. "Nowt but net!"

Chucky-Joe Partridge wore his tuxedo with white tennis shoes and no shirt. This allowed his chest tattoos to show clearly. "The South Shall Rise Again," read one of them. Another said, "Will Drink Beer for Food."

These two, aware, as are all those who toil in Hollywood, that publicity is everything, saw in Desmond Wicklow a free ticket to front-page photos. They filled his dance card, so to speak, at this party and at the smaller one they went to in the wee small hours. "Our duty," Chucky-Joe intoned more than once, "is to make sure this sweet old guy doesn't crawl away someplace and get sober."

This situation made it difficult, but not impossible, for Charles Kincaid to carry out Margo's lethal instructions. "Stand by," she said. "Once you get Des away from here, he'll never know what hit him. It will be like stunning and gutting a fish."

"I wish I was back in London."

"You will be. It's almost over. Come with me." She made for the table where Desmond was trying to tell Chucky-Joe how fast a Spitfire could fly.

"Gentlemen, excuse me," Margo said in her most condescending tone. "I must take your friend away, because we have an early plane to catch. Help me, Kincaid. Take Mr. Wicklow's other arm. Perhaps you'd better grab the seat of his pants while you're at it."

The basketball player and the movie star watched as their playmate was transported from the room like a department-store mannequin. "Poor old Des," Chucky-Joe said. "He never had a chance."

"Nowt but net!" Slam Duncan murmured as his knees buckled and he laid his eight-foot length upon the carpet.

The restaurant where the party was taking place was located far south on La Cienega, adjoining gang territory. The aggressive presence of these tribal people was attested to by graffiti on storefronts, billboards, light standards . . . every place where the nozzle of a spray-paint can could be introduced.

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"This is the ideal location," Margo hissed. "He wandered outside and was mugged. Be sure you rob him after you kill him."

"How do I do that?"

"Strangle him. Or hit him with a piece of paving stone." The lady was exasperated. "Butlers don't ask questions. Just get it done. I'll be waiting in the limo."

As Kincaid lugged his victim down a dark alley, the weight became more manageable. Desmond Wicklow was now capable of locomotion. The butler glanced at the face next to his and saw eyes wide open. One of them performed a majestic wink.

"I'm not as peep as drunkle think I am," Desmond said. "You may unload me."

The two men sat on a low concrete wall. "You must have heard everything."

"Margo's murder plot? She's had several goes at me. I don't think she really wants me dead. It just seems a good idea at the time."

"What are we to do?"

"Give the lady what she wants. Let's make up a story."

Kincaid let himself into the limo and sat beside Margo. "Is he dead?" she asked.

"Not even close."

"What happened?"

"As soon as I got my hands around his throat, he sobered up. I had to explain what I was doing. And why. Desmond admitted he had wanted to kill you, but not anymore. Not since he's fallen in love with Lucy Jellicoe."

"He hasn't!"

"He has. I said I'd better go ahead and kill him anyway. Because you were so keen on it. He said all right, but he wanted time to write a final message to Lucy. Well, I had to agree to that. So he took out a notebook and pen and began scribbling away in the light from the restaurant kitchen window. While he was doing that, I had time to think. You were bothered by his pursuit of you. The stalking. You spurned him and then he threatened to kill you."

"If he couldn't have me, nobody could." Margo sounded wistful. "It's a sweet sentiment, really."

"But now that will never happen because he's in love with Lucy. So there's no more motive to murder Desmond. Q.E.D."

"I suppose you're right." The limousine was racing towards the hotel. "Did you read what he wrote in his notebook?"

"He was still working on it when I left him. He'll show us if it's important."

After a while, Margo said, "Tell me something, Charles. Would you have been able to kill him?"

"I'd started to," the butler said. "But I couldn't quite do it."

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The great airplane was somewhere over northern waters heading for England. Margo Fletcher was staring blearily out the window. Her tranquilizer pill had kicked in. Beside her, Charles Kincaid was pretending to be asleep. She elbowed him in the ribs.

"Yes?"

"It's not over."

He glanced at his watch. "Four hours to go."

"I mean I still need you to do something for me."

"I'll do what I can, Margo."

"We shared all those years in school. I've been there for her whenever she needed me. The shop on the High Street was my idea. And this is how she pays me back. Sneaking around and alienating the affections of Desmond Wicklow. I knew him long before she did."

"What in the world are you on about?"

Margo turned her face away from the window and stared at Kincaid. "I'm going to need you to kill Lucy Jellicoe," she said. Then she added with operatic passion, "How can I live with such betrayal? Desmond is my oldest and dearest friend."

Desmond Wicklow showed up at the High Street shop carrying his spiral-bound notebook. Margo was alone. She greeted him with the words, "Your lover is not here. She went to the bank."

"I came to see you." The author opened the notebook and showed Margo a page of neat handwriting. "Read that."

The script began: "On the evening of the Academy Awards in Los Angeles, I, Desmond Wicklow, was attacked by Charles Kincaid. He tried to strangle me but was unable to carry out the murder. He told me subsequently that he had been delegated to kill me by Margo Fletcher. Now he has informed me that she has commissioned another such crime. She has asked him to despatch her partner, Lucy Jellicoe. If anything happens to Miss Jellicoe, talk to Mr. Kincaid. He will confirm this information."

Margo did not hesitate. She ripped the page from the notebook and tore it into small pieces. "That's no good," Wicklow said. "A duplicate copy is among my papers at home. In a sealed envelope addressed to the Chief Constable, Scotland Yard."

"I don't ask much," Margo said. "All I want is not to feel so frustrated all the time."

"Easily taken care of. Come with me to dinner tonight. You're a maniac, Margo. But a most attractive one."

They embraced as she said, "If I were serious about having you or Lucy killed, I'd assign somebody better than poor old Charles."

"That's obvious," Wicklow said. "He's a butler. They only do it in books." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

THE PROBLEM OF THE INTERRUPTED SÉANCE

by Edward D. Hoch

Despite a few morale-boosting events like Doolittle's April bombing of Tokyo and the RAF's bombing of German cities, during those early months of 1942 the war was going badly (Dr. Sam Hawthorne told his companion when they had settled down with their usual small libations). The Japanese had taken all of the Philippines, Hong Kong, and most of the East Indies. In North Africa, Rommel's tanks seemed unstoppable.

In Northmont, in the first six months of my marriage to Annabel, the war and everything else seemed far away. Gasoline rationing had begun in seventeen states in mid May, and was sure to spread soon. But the crime rate in Northmont had actually seemed to fall since the December tragedy that had claimed the life of our maid of honor. Sheriff Lens had his own theory about the improved social climate, attributing it to the fact that many of

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the town's young punks had enlisted or been drafted. Some of the enlistments had come following the news that one of Northmont's own was missing in the attack on Pearl Harbor.

His name was Ronald Hale and he'd been a seaman aboard the ill-fated battleship *Arizona*. Though the attack angered the entire country, the blow was felt hardest in hometowns such as Northmont, and in families such as Ron Hale's. His mother Kate, a patient of mine, was devastated by the news. It was early June when she came to me for a checkup, the first since her son had been confirmed dead.

The Dr. Sam Hawthorne series having recently reached the early 1940s (with cases related as recollections of an older Dr. Sam), *EQMM*, founded in 1941, gets a mention in this one as part of the historical setting. Here, once again, Dr. Sam is confronted with an impossible crime of the "locked room" variety. Mr. Hoch is in his thirty-first year of consecutive contributions to this magazine, and the stories just keep getting stronger. ¶

"You've had a bad time, Kate," I told her. "How are you sleeping?"

"Not well, Dr. Sam. I think about him all the time, going down with his ship in what he thought was a safe harbor."

"I can give you something to help you sleep, but the rest is up to you. How is Art taking it?" Art Hale wasn't a patient of mine but I knew him from the town council, on which he'd served for several years.

"Better than me, now, but he had a terrible time at first. Back in January and February he just went away for days at a time. Our son's death was confirmed to us in mid April, before the official casualty list was announced on May first. When Art got the news, he went through it all again. I think he was drinking heavily while he was gone, but he never admitted it." I took her blood pressure, which was higher than normal, and gave my usual words of caution. But I could see her mind was elsewhere. "Can I talk to you about something, Dr. Sam?"

"Anything at all. That's what I'm here for." I expected some sort of sexual secret, which wasn't too unusual in my experience.

Instead she told me, "I've been to Boston to see a psychic."

"What?" My face must have reflected my surprise.

"A woman there contacted me several weeks ago and claimed she could communicate with the dead. I—I really think she might be able to reach Ron."

"Kate," I said, not unkindly, "you can't believe in such things. People like that are just out to get your money."

"I know. That's what Art told me when I suggested the possibil-

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ity. I didn't dare tell him I'd already been there for two sessions with this woman."

"Who is she?" I asked.

"Her name is Sandra Gleam, or at least that's what she calls herself. 'Sandra Gleam—Lifting the Veil of the Afterlife.' She's a woman in her late forties, about my age, and she does seem to get results."

"What sort of results?" I asked with more than a little scepticism.

"She's contacted an Indian guide on the other side who says he can bring Ron to talk to me."

"And of course you paid her for this?"

"Certainly. I'd give a great deal to actually speak with my son again."

"And your husband knows nothing of this?"

She took a deep breath. "I haven't told him, and that's my problem. Sandra Gleam feels she needs to conduct a small séance at our home, with just my husband and me taking part. She says that would be the most comfortable setting for Ron."

I shook my head, more in sorrow than in reprimand. "Kate, you don't know what you're getting into here. The woman is a charlatan. She's using all sorts of trickery."

"How do you know that? You've never even met her."

"I know the way psychics operate."

"When she was in her trance I could see ectoplasm above her head."

"Gauze coated with phosphorescent paint."

"A small seashell appeared on the table as a sign from my son, even though I was holding both her hands."

"But the room was dark?"

"Mostly," she admitted. "There was a dim light so I could see there was no one else in the room."

"She had the shell hidden in her mouth, or perhaps even regurgitated it from her stomach. It's a trick some mediums are quite skilled at."

Kate Hale pondered this for a moment. "I have to do it. I have to take the chance that she's on the level." An idea seemed to light up her face. "Look here, Dr. Sam, since you know so much about this, could you attend the séance, too? If you're there to prove she's not a fake, my husband might go along with the idea."

I shook my head. "I think I'd have to say no to that, Kate. It falls far outside my duties as a physician."

She gave a reluctant sigh. "All right. Thank you for listening to me, at least."

My wife Annabel was Northmont's only veterinarian, and Annabel's

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Ark had become a haven for creatures of all shapes and sizes. That afternoon, following a house call at a farm near there, I stopped by the Ark on my way home and found her removing a painful thorn from a cat's paw. "Much the way Androcles would have done it," I suggested.

"I'm far gentler than Androcles, or hadn't you noticed?"

"I'm on my way home. You coming soon?"

She sighed and glanced over at the row of cages where her assistant was treating a large German shepherd. "I've got at least another hour here. Then I'll be along."

"I've got an idea. Let's meet at Max's for dinner. Say, seven o'clock?"

"Sounds perfect!" she readily agreed. Max's Steakhouse was our favorite restaurant in Northmont, the scene of our December wedding reception.

I changed my clothes and arrived at Max's about fifteen minutes early. Annabel hadn't yet come in and I was surprised to see Kate Hale and her husband seated in one of the booths. It seemed foolish to ignore them, so I said hello as I passed. Arthur Hale immediately stood up to greet me. "Hello, Doctor. Could you join us for a drink?"

"I'm meeting my wife. She should be here momentarily."

"Sit down anyway, until she comes."

I signaled Max so he'd know where I was and then joined them in the booth. "Nothing to drink for me," I told them. "I'll wait for Annabel."

Art Hale was a scholarly type who wore gold-rimmed glasses and smoked a pipe. He was around fifty, maybe a few years older than his wife, and when he wasn't busy on the town council he worked at a small printing business he owned that employed about a dozen people. "Kate has been telling me about her visits to this woman in Boston. She said she discussed it with you today. What's your opinion of it?"

I was reluctant to be dragged into a family dispute, but I felt I should repeat what I'd already told Kate. When I'd finished, she joined in. "Art feels the same way you do, Dr. Sam, and I'll admit you may be right. But what harm is there in finding out? All she's asking to come out here and hold a séance at our house is three hundred dollars, plus her travel expenses."

"Three hundred dollars is a lot of money," Hale murmured.

"To talk to our son? To hear his voice one more time?"

"Kate—" His voice was pleading now. "Be reasonable."

"If you're so afraid the woman is a fraud we can ask Dr. Sam to be present."

"I don't—"

But I'd barely started my objection when her husband's face brightened. "Would you, Doctor?"

"This is a bit out of my line," I protested.

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"Nonsense! You have quite a reputation as a solver of mysteries. Isn't this the same thing, in a way?"

"If you suspect some sort of fraud is being perpetrated you need to call on Sheriff Lens, not me."

"Maybe both of you could be there," Kate suggested.

I saw a way out of this entanglement. "If you can convince Sheriff Lens, I'll go along with it, too." It seemed a sure bet that the sheriff would have nothing to do with such a thing.

That's where I was wrong.

Sheriff Lens phoned me the following afternoon. "Hello, Doc. Still surviving married life?"

"There's nothing like it," I assured him. "Have you decided to run for another term?" It was a question I asked every four years and the answer had always been yes. He'd been elected sheriff for the first time in 1918, almost four years before I came to Northmont, and was completing his sixth term.

"In a weak moment I promised Vera I wouldn't run again this time. She says twenty-four years is enough for anyone, but hell, Doc—what would I do? Retire to a farm and raise chickens? I told her with the war on and all I had to serve one more term and she agreed."

I had to chuckle silently at that. I couldn't imagine Northmont with someone else as sheriff. "Anyway," he went on, "what I called about is this séance business with Art Hale and his wife."

"Forget about it, Sheriff. I told them I'd come if you did, but it was just a way of getting out of the whole thing. I'm sorry they lost a son, but I can't encourage them. It's obvious this Sandra Gleam is just out for their money. She wants to do the séance here so she can get a look at their home and decide how much she can get out of them."

"Isn't that all the more reason we should be there to protect them and expose her?" the sheriff argued. "Who could do it better than us?"

I had to admit he had a point. "Do you really want to do this?" I asked.

"I think we should, Doc."

I sighed in surrender and asked, "When is she coming?"

"Saturday. She'll stay with them overnight and return to Boston on Sunday."

"Is she driving down?"

"Taking the train. Gasoline is scarce with the rationing and all."

As a physician, I was allowed a bit more gasoline than the average person, but I had to display the colored sticker I was issued for it on my front windshield. Train travel was becoming more popular, especially for our town, far removed from any commercial airport. "All right, Sheriff. If you're game, so am I."

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Art and Kate Hale met the train with Sandra Gleam on board late Saturday afternoon. As it turned out, that was June 6th, exactly six months since our wedding day, and Annabel had expected us to celebrate with dinner out or at least a private evening at home. All I could promise her was that I'd return as early as possible, and that didn't go over well.

I picked up Sheriff Lens in my Buick and we set off for our destination. "Been listening to the news, Doc? There are rumors of a big sea battle out around the Midway Islands in the Pacific."

"I hope we're winning."

I'd been to the Hale home a few times on house calls, and I was familiar with the impressive brick facade. It had once been a church perched on a hilltop at the end of Meadow Lane. No one seemed to remember what had happened to the congregation, but it had been remodeled into a private home in the 1920s. The layout was a bit awkward and they'd ended up with a windowless storage room across from the kitchen. Some thought the house had been partitioned that way to provide a so-called "thunder room" for those afraid of violent storms, but others offered a more prosaic explanation. The house had been remodeled during prohibition and a garage had been turned into the windowless room to serve as a storage area for cases of illegal scotch smuggled into the country.

In any event, it was empty to the bare walls and concrete floor now, except for a single card table and three folding chairs. An open bottle of white wine and three glasses stood on the table. A ceiling light provided the only illumination. Art and Kate Hale had been awaiting our arrival, and quickly introduced us to Sandra Gleam. As Kate had said, she was a woman in her late forties, with jet-black hair worn to shoulder length. Her figure was surprisingly trim and her dark eyes seemed to study each of us intently. She wore a long black dress with a pink scarf at her neck. It was her only touch of color. She was not the sort of woman I would have wanted for an enemy, yet she had a certain animal attraction. The three chairs around the card table told me that she had already excluded the sheriff and me from the séance.

"Dr. Hawthorne," she said when we were introduced. "Kate has told me much about you. I have looked forward to this meeting." I tried to read her eyes, but it was impossible. She might have been flirting with me, for all I knew.

"And I look forward to sitting in on your séance," I informed her.

"Alas, that will not be possible tonight. If I am to have any success in reaching the spirit of Ron Hale, only his closest flesh-and-blood relatives can be present."

Sheriff Lens didn't like the sound of that. "Look here, I have to be certain that no crime is being committed."

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Sandra Gleam turned her eyes to him for the first time. "Does the town of Northmont have an ordinance against communicating with the dead?"

"Well, no," he admitted.

"Or trying to help people through their bereavement?"

"No. But we do have laws against swindling and confidence games."

The dark-haired woman turned toward Mrs. Hale and her husband. "Have I tried to defraud you? Have I asked for any money other than my rather modest fee?"

"Certainly not!" Kate was quick to insist. Art Hale remained silent.

I had to come up with something to justify our presence. "If we can't be part of the séance, you must allow us to search this room, to make certain no sort of trickery is concealed here."

The woman shrugged. "It's their room, not mine. I am entering it for the first time."

The windowless room was about the right size for a car, though if there had been a garage entrance it was gone now. The walls were all solid and the overhead light was too high to reach without a ladder. The card table and chairs were closely examined by the sheriff and me, but there was nothing hidden in or under them.

"Are you satisfied?" Sandra Gleam asked.

I looked at her long black dress, well aware that it could conceal all the tricks of a medium's trade. "Would you be willing to allow Mrs. Hale to frisk you?" I asked.

The woman smiled slightly at my suggestion. "Only if I could do the same to her."

"Look here—" Art Hale started to protest, but his wife stopped him.

"That's fine with me," she agreed. "Let's get to it."

While the medium stood still and raised her hands above her head, Kate Hale ran her own hands down the slender body, taking special care to feel around the legs. At one point Sandra Gleam slipped her feet out of her shoes so they could be searched as well. When Mrs. Hale lifted one of her feet she laughed. "I'm a bit ticklish there."

Then Sandra repeated the procedure with Kate Hale, who seemed a bit embarrassed by the groping hands but did not complain. "All right," her husband said, turning to Sheriff Lens. "You might as well search me as well."

When all the searching was finished, nothing unusual had been found. Sandra's purse remained on the kitchen counter and Hale had left his wallet and keys there, too. The women had no pockets in their dresses, and Hale's pockets held only a handkerchief and his leather eyeglass case.

I asked about the wine and was told that Sandra had brought it.

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"Some cooks drink a bit of white wine while they prepare a meal," she told me. "My bottle serves the same purpose."

I held it to the light but there was nothing else in the bottle. I took a sip and agreed it was wine and nothing else. "A very good wine," I complimented her.

"Then we are ready," Sandra Gleam announced, filling the three glasses. Turning to the sheriff and me she said, "The Hales and I will now adjourn here for the séance. You may stand guard at the door if you wish."

But before they could begin, an odd thing happened. It was still daylight on this June evening, and the sound of a bell reached our ears. It was not the doorbell, but an irregular ringing that seemed to come from the street. Kate Hale knew at once what it was. "That's the knife grinder. Sheriff, could you get those two paring knives I left on the kitchen counter and take them out to him? I left some money there, too."

Sheriff Lens seemed to hesitate at performing this household chore and I immediately said, "You stay here, Sheriff. I'll do it."

I found the knives and hurried out to the curb. Pete Petrov, the knife grinder, stopped his wagon when he saw me. "What're you doing out this way, Dr. Sam?"

"Visiting a patient," I told him. "Sharpen these two for her, will you?"

"Sure thing!" He took the knives and operated the foot pedal on his grinder, holding the blade close enough to send sparks flying. After a moment he repeated the process with the second blade. "There you are! Good as new." I took the paring knives and paid him. "Say hello to Mrs. Hale for me," he called as he moved on with his wagon, pulling the bell cord to announce his passing.

"Thanks. I'll do that."

I went back inside and returned the paring knives to the kitchen counter by the stove. Sheriff Lens was standing by the closed door of the storeroom. "I heard some mumbling but now it's silent," he reported.

"Did they lock the door?"

"No, but no spirits from the beyond are getting by me, Doc."

I smiled. "You're not supposed to keep them out. Sandra Gleam wants them let in."

We waited for several minutes, listening for a sound, but all seemed quiet behind the door.

Finally the sheriff asked, "Think we should take a look, Doc?"

"It's only been about fifteen minutes so far. Séances can go on longer than that."

I paced around a bit longer, and then sat down to glance through the Hales' magazines. They had the latest issues of *Life* and *National Geographic,* along with an issue of *Ellery Queen's Mys-*

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tery Magazine, which had begun publication the previous fall. I skimmed through it and was settling down to read a story by Stuart Palmer when there was a thump from the closed room.

"Are you all right in there?" Sheriff Lens called out, but there was no answer. He turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open.

I could see that the overhead light was still on. Art Hale was slumped over, his head on the table. Kate had toppled off her chair and was lying unconscious on the floor. Sandra Gleam was upright in her chair, her head back and the pink scarf a mass of blood. Her throat had been cut.

It took us a few moments to revive Kate and Art Hale. Both seemed drowsy and possibly drugged. Neither could remember anything after drinking the wine and joining hands with Sandra for the beginning of the séance.

"One of you better remember something," Sheriff Lens told them. "You two were alone with her in this room and I was guarding the only door. No one else could have killed her. And she sure didn't kill herself. There's no knife."

I'd examined Sandra Gleam and confirmed that she was dead. Now I searched carefully around the body, the chairs, and the table. There was no knife. "I'm afraid we'll have to search you both again," I told them.

Careful not to be too invasive, I went over Kate's clothing and felt along her body. She was my patient, after all, and I'd examined her body many times. There was no weapon of any sort. I watched while Sheriff Lens did the same with her husband. He removed the handkerchief and eyeglass case from Hale's pocket, sliding the glasses partway out, then going over his body with nimble fingers. There was no doubt in my mind that neither of them could have concealed a knife or even a razor blade. And why would they? What motive could they have had for killing this woman?

Still, I had to consider every possibility. I took a couple of tongue depressors from the bag I always carried and checked Art's and Kate's throats with a small flashlight. "What's the purpose of this?" Hale demanded.

"Say *ah,* please."

He did as he was told and his wife followed along, too. "I had to be sure neither of you slid a knife down your throat." I explained.

"You think I'm a sword-swallower or something?" he asked.

"I had to rule out the possibility."

"And Kate? Did you ever hear of a female sword-swallower?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," I told him. "There was a woman named Edith Clifford, around the turn of the century, who was said to have swallowed up to sixteen short swords at one time. She was

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with the circus. Both of you seem in the clear, though. Let's move out of here and let the sheriff call in his people."

While Sheriff Lens was on the phone, Art Hale headed for the kitchen to retrieve his wallet, with Kate close behind. "I know I didn't kill that woman and there were only two of us in the room with her. Art, did you—?"

He turned on her then. "No, I didn't, Kate. If anyone killed her, it was you."

I quickly intervened. "This will get us nowhere. We have to think this out."

Kate moved to the kitchen counter and picked up a sharpened paring knife. "Where's the other knife?" she asked.

"It's right there someplace. The grinder man sharpened both of them and I left them for you."

But there was only one knife now. The second knife had vanished. Though the sheriff and I searched the kitchen, there was no sign of it, not even in the drawer with the other cutlery. "We'd better check these two again," he said.

I agreed, and we went over Hale and his wife even more carefully the second time. But the missing knife did not reappear. "My God!" Kate Hale suddenly gasped, as if she'd just realized the full import of what had happened. "Could one of the spirit guides have taken it and killed her with it?"

Sheriff Lens scoffed. "I'd believe in an invisible man before I'd believe in spirits."

"But even an invisible man couldn't have picked up the knife and carried it into that room," I said. "You were already guarding the closed door when I returned with the sharpened knives."

"Forget the knife, then, Doc. One of these two had to have killed her."

"With what? You can't cut a throat like that with a fingernail."

"What about those wineglasses?"

We all reentered the room and examined the glasses and bottle, but there were no sharp edges, no cracks. All three glasses were nearly empty, and I sniffed them. Then I put a drop from the bottle on my finger and touched it to my tongue. "I can't be certain, but it seems likely there was something in the wine that put you both to sleep."

"Sandra poured it herself," Kate Hale told us. "Why would she want to knock us out?"

"Perhaps so she could rig up some spiritualist trickery," I suggested. "She may have planned to awaken you when she was ready."

"Come on, Doc," Sheriff Lens objected. "If you think she let another person into the room, it just couldn't be!"

"Maybe not a flesh-and-blood person," Kate said, "but she was dealing with spirits."

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"Kate—" her husband began.

"I know you don't believe me, but what other explanation is there? She summoned a spirit who took my sharpened paring knife from the kitchen counter, came in here, and killed her with it."

"Why would the spirit do that?" I asked, trying to reason with her. "She was their friend."

Her husband was exasperated by the whole business. "Let's stop imagining spirits. There are none. The woman obviously cut her own throat. There's no other explanation."

"Then what happened to the knife?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"Perhaps it was made of ice that melted and mingled with the blood from her throat."

I shook my head. "Ice wouldn't have been sharp enough for that wound, and everyone was searched, remember? No one could have been hiding an ice dagger."

"She might have used a razor blade and swallowed it as she lay dying."

"After cutting her throat? Hardly, Mr. Hale." But his bizarre suggestion had triggered something in my mind. In addition to sword-swallowers, there were people who could swallow things like razor blades. Either of the Hales might have taped a razor blade to their leg that might have escaped our search. They might have used it to cut Sandra Gleam's throat and then swallowed it.

"What are you thinking, Doc?" the sheriff asked.

"If it's all right with you, I'd like to take Mr. and Mrs. Hale down to the hospital for a fluoroscope examination."

"An X-ray?"

I nodded. "Just to make certain there are no sharp objects in them."

Art Hale grumbled a bit, but I drove them to the hospital after the sheriff's deputies and the coroner arrived. I was careful not to let them out of my sight, not even for a restroom visit, until after I'd given each of them a full-body X-ray scan. There were no razor blades or any other weapons hidden either inside or outside their bodies. Whatever had killed Sandra Gleam was still in that room, or had been removed by some method I couldn't imagine. I thought about a case I'd investigated during my early days in Northmont, involving a man's throat cut by a slender fishing line. But there was nothing of the sort here, nothing that could be found in two body searches and a fluoroscope examination.

I wanted to go back and examine that windowless room again, before the Hales returned to the house. The sheriff solved the problem for me when he requested that the couple accompany him to his office to make a full statement. I asked Hale for the key to his house in case the deputies were gone from there. He took the

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ring of keys from his pocket and puzzled over them. "I can't see close up without my glasses. It's a Yale lock."

"This one," I said, detaching it from the ring. "I'll get it back to you." I left them with the sheriff, checking first with my nurse April to make sure there were no emergencies.

The coroner and the deputies were still at the Hale house. Watching them work, I realized how much Sheriff Lens had improved on his investigative techniques during my twenty years in Northmont. One of the deputies even took a small sample of grit he'd noticed on the concrete floor. "If it was a spook, he may have brought something over from the other side," he said. I couldn't argue with that.

"How about your measurements?" I asked. "Any chance there could be a secret panel or hidden closet here?"

"Nothing like that, Doc. These walls are solid, the floor's concrete, and the ceiling has only the single light fixture."

I carried a stool from the kitchen and climbed up to take a look at that fixture. The frosted glass globe screwed on over two light bulbs. Nothing had been disturbed. Next I went to the light switch by the door and unscrewed the switch plate. There was space enough for a small knife or razor blade behind it, though I saw nothing but a spider hurrying to escape into the woodwork.

Nothing.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if the answer might lie not in Northmont but in Boston.

Annabel was not happy when I told her I was driving two hours to Boston the following morning and might have to remain there overnight. I knew she couldn't accompany me. There was too much work to be done at the Ark. "Why was this woman killed?" I asked. "That's what I need to know. If Kate Hale realized she was a fraud, why would she go to the trouble of luring her to Northmont to kill her in this manner? And why would her husband kill her without at least seeing what her game was?"

"But who can you talk to in Boston?" Annabel wondered.

"Mrs. Hale says there was a sister. Maybe I can learn something from her."

The news from Midway was encouraging the following morning, and our naval victory overshadowed a report that the Japanese had landed a small force on two of Alaska's Aleutian Islands. The weather was good for my drive into Boston, and the Sunday traffic was at a minimum. I located Sandra Gleam's address without difficulty, an apartment she'd shared with her sister in one of the big old buildings overlooking Boston Common.

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Josephine Gleam answered the door. "Are you from the police?" she immediately asked. "They've already been here once."

I introduced myself and explained that I was helping the Northmont sheriff investigate her sister's murder. Josephine was attractive and probably younger than Sandra, a tall, slim woman with long brown hair and bangs.

"This has been a terrible shock to me," she said in a familiar Boston accent, "but I must tell you right off that we weren't really sisters. Sandra and I were very close, but the Gleam Sisters only existed on stage."

"Stage?"

"Vaudeville. Do you have any idea who killed her?"

"Not yet," I admitted. "We're working on it." She invited me in and I took a seat facing her. "Do you perform séances, too?"

"That whole business was a—" She caught herself, perhaps not wanting to speak ill of her friend. Then, after an awkward moment of silence, she began again. "Sandra and I had a vaudeville act together about ten years ago. That's when we became the Gleam Sisters. It was a mind-reading thing. I would wander through the audience in my spangled tights, holding up items like a pocket watch or a necklace, and Sandra would try to identify the objects while blindfolded. Of course, my patter always contained a key-word clue that we'd worked out in advance."

"You're telling me the act was a fraud?"

She grew restless, fidgeting in her chair. "It was vaudeville. We were there to entertain, just like the magicians. Everyone knew it was an act."

"All this was Sandra's idea?"

"Well, yes, I guess it was. We were both younger then. She thought having a vaudeville act was a great way to attract guys."

"You weren't married?"

"Not then, but Sandra always had guys around."

"When did she start this spiritualism business with the séances?"

Josephine shrugged. "Vaudeville died and she just drifted into it, went from reading minds to speaking with the dead. I guess she viewed it as a natural progression."

"Did you help her with this?" I asked.

"No, no. I'm a secretary at the state capitol. We shared this apartment, but then we went our separate ways. I was married for a few years and when that went bad she took me in."

I consulted some notes that I'd made. "Kate Hale, the woman who lost her son at Pearl Harbor, said that Sandra contacted her about a séance. Do you know just when that was?"

She thought about it. "I could find out. She kept a record of all her contacts. Not men friends, just her spiritualist business. She

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watched the newspapers all over southern New England, checking the casualty lists from the war. When someone was confirmed dead, she telephoned the next of kin and offered her services."

"It was a cruel sort of confidence game."

"Sometimes I think she really helped those people." Josephine had gone to a desk in one corner of the room and while she spoke she glanced through Sandra's appointment book. "Here it is! She telephoned Kate Hale in Northmont on April twenty-fifth and invited her to attend a séance here. Mrs. Hale came to Boston two weeks later, on May eighth, and returned a week after that for a second séance."

"Did you know that Sandra was planning a séance at the Hale home in Northmont?"

"No. I was quite surprised when the police told me that. She rarely conducted her sessions anywhere but here. I know, because I usually had to stay out of the way when she scheduled one."

"Was there anyone who disliked Sandra, who might have had a motive for killing her?"

"Not that I know of."

I asked her a few more questions but learned nothing of interest. Sandra Gleam's life seemed as much a riddle as her death. I drove back to Northmont later that afternoon.

"We're up against a stone wall, Doc," Sheriff Lens told me the following morning. "Either Hale or his wife must have killed her, but what happened to the weapon? Is it possible they acted together? And what was their motive?"

"If they wanted to kill her, they would hardly have done it in their own home under these impossible circumstances. There's something we're not seeing here."

"What about that knife grinder, Pete Petrov? Might he have sneaked into the room somehow after he sharpened those knives for you?"

"Only if he could walk through walls. What about that bottle of wine? Did you have it analyzed?"

He nodded. "It contained a mild but fast-acting sleeping powder, likely put there by one of those three."

"I tasted just a drop before the séance and it seemed all right to me, but the sleeping powder might have been added later, by either Hale or his wife. Surely Sandra Gleam didn't do it."

"Only two real suspects and we can't solve this thing! Any suggestions, Doc?"

"Just that we go back to the Hale house and keep looking. Maybe something will jump out at us."

The June weather had turned unusually warm, and Kate Hale already had roses in her garden when we pulled up in the sheriff's

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car. "Aren't they beauties?" she asked. "This is a new bush I planted in Ron's honor. I think he would have liked that."

"We're sorry to bother you again," the sheriff told her, "but there are still a great many questions to be answered."

Her husband had noticed our arrival and joined us at the rose garden. "Any leads yet?" he asked. The bright sun reflected off the silver frames of his glasses and he put up a hand to shield his eyes.

"Nothing. I'm sure it's not news that the two of you are the prime suspects. Nobody else got in or out of the room."

"We were both unconscious," Art Hale pointed out.

I shook my head. "One of you didn't drink your glass of wine until after you'd cut Sandra Gleam's throat. Let's go in the house."

They both seemed reluctant to face more questioning. "I didn't kill her," Kate Hale said. "So it had to have been Art."

He glared at her. "Kate . . ."

"Inside," Sheriff Lens ordered, herding them both toward the door.

I took the opportunity to have another look at their kitchen, where that sharpened paring knife had vanished so mysteriously. For some reason, it didn't seem mysterious at all anymore. I'd wakened that morning remembering that I'd placed the knives on the kitchen counter near the stove. Sure enough, there was a narrow space, little more than a quarter of an inch, between counter and stove. "Do you have a flashlight?" I asked Hale.

He produced one and I pointed it between the cupboard and the stove. At the bottom, resting on the floor, was the missing paring knife. "That's a mystery solved," I told them.

"It must have fallen there," Hale decided.

"Or been put there by the killer. One of you came into the kitchen after we found Sandra's body, saw the knives, and pushed one of them through the crack between the counter and stove. It could only have been the killer who did it, to strengthen the illusion of a spirit taking the knife to cut Sandra's throat."

"Which one of them, Doc?" the sheriff asked. "You know, don't you?"

"Yes, I know."

We'd settled down around the kitchen table, like old friends, and Kate was even brewing a pot of coffee for us. "You see," I began, "the motive was the key to it all. Even though Sandra Gleam might have been trying to swindle you both out of some money, that hardly made a motive for murder. You could merely have walked away, told her you were through with séances. No, it had to be something else. When I thought about my conversation yesterday with Sandra's roommate and old vaudeville partner, I knew what it was."

"How could you?" Kate Hale asked.

"The dates weren't right. According to Sandra's appointment book, she first called you about your dead son on April twenty-fifth

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and you attended your first séance in Boston on May eighth, returning a week later. The two of you were notified of Ron's death in mid April, but the announcement to the press didn't come until May first. Sandra watched the papers for the lists of casualties, but she couldn't have learned of your son's confirmed death as early as April twenty-fifth—not from the papers, at least. In fact, since we live in a small town two hours from Boston, it's safe to say that the only way Sandra Gleam could have learned the confirmation of your son's death at that early date was if one of you two told her."

"Wait a minute!" Art protested. "She might have found his name on an earlier list of the missing."

I shook my head. "Séances are only for communicating with the dead. One of you had to have told Sandra your son was confirmed dead. It could hardly have been you, Kate, or there'd have been no reason for her to carefully record calling you on April twenty-fifth. But you told me Art was badly affected by the report that Ron was missing in action at Pearl Harbor. He went off for several days in January and February, and then again in April, when the tragic news was confirmed. You thought he was drinking, and perhaps he was. But I believe he drove to Boston for his drinking, and there he met Sandra Gleam, a woman always on the lookout for men."

The blood had drained from Kate's face as I spoke. I knew I was putting her through hell, but there was no other way. "He told Sandra, and she contacted you for a séance, Kate. When you finally told him about it, he must have been furious, though he may not have shown the full extent of his anger. Perhaps he got on the phone to Sandra and told her to stay away from his wife and not even think about journeying to Northmont. He knew she was after money, and what better way to procure it? I imagine she had a whole series of expensive séances in mind, and if you tried to stop her she'd have gone right to Kate and revealed you as an adulterer."

"That's a great deal of speculation," Art Hale told me. "Can you prove any of it?"

"You were the first to return to the kitchen counter for your wallet and keys, when that paring knife was made to disappear. But I can do better than that. I can show that you and only you could have murdered Sandra Gleam."

He smiled slightly. "Without a weapon? With Sheriff Lens guarding the door?"

"You had a weapon, and Sheriff Lens of all people should have guessed what it was."

The sheriff seemed baffled by my words. "I should have guessed? Why me?"

"Because Art cut the blackmailing Sandra Gleam's throat with a broken lens from his eyeglasses."

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Hale's face turned ashen as I ticked off the points on my fingers. "As I noticed the other night at Max's Steakhouse, your regular eyeglasses have gold frames. The ones you're wearing now—an extra pair, no doubt—have silver frames. And in the hours after the murder you wore no glasses at all. You even commented to me that you were unable to choose the correct key up close without your glasses. The sheriff found them in your leather case, in your pocket, after the killing, but as I remember, he only pulled them partway out of the case."

"How could he have done it, Sam?" Sheriff Lens wanted to know.

"By drugging the wine after I'd taken a sip, while we were distracted by the knife grinder's arrival. He then pretended to drink while Kate and Sandra really did. When they'd dozed off, after several minutes he took Sandra's scarf, which he would have known she'd be wearing, covered his fingers while he broke a lens of his glasses, and then held the largest piece with the scarf while he cut her throat with it. The scarf protected his fingers against getting cut, as well as helping shield him from the blood. Then he drank the wine and collapsed along with his wife. Even if we'd taken the glasses from their case we might not have noticed immediately that there was a lens missing."

"What happened to the broken glass?" the sheriff wanted to know. "Are you telling me he swallowed it?"

"No, I'm telling you he ground it to dust underfoot, against the concrete floor. Ask your deputy about that sample of grit he gathered from the floor."

That was when Kate turned to him. "Art, is this true?"

"She was blackmailing me, Kate, and using our heartbreak over Ron's death to bleed us for money. After the pain of his death, I couldn't stand to have you learn I'd found comfort with another woman. If I hadn't killed her, it would have gone on and on."

It was a sad case with a sad ending. Sheriff Lens and I barely spoke at first, after Art had been taken away. Finally the sheriff said, "There were only the two of them with Sandra, Doc. He must have known Kate would be certain of his guilt."

"Not necessarily, Sheriff. It was a chance he had to take. If he could make the crime seem impossible, perhaps she'd believe someone from the spirit world really had killed Sandra. That was why he hid the paring knife when he had a chance, to strengthen the impossibility of it."

When I saw Annabel that evening she told me a cat had died at the Ark that day. "I actually cried a bit, Sam. She was such a pretty thing. Do you ever shed any tears about murder victims?"

"I had no tears for Sandra Gleam," I said, and then sat down to tell her about it. ●

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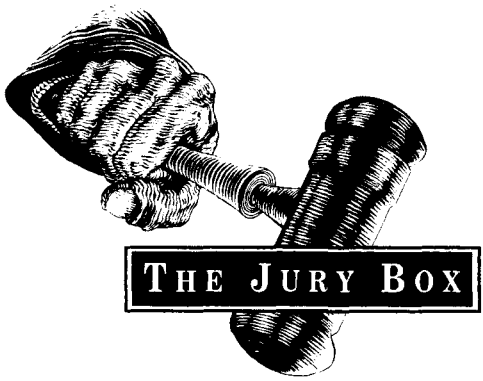

by Jon L. Breen

Back when the pulps and slicks were omnivorous fiction markets, the novelette or short novel of 15,000–30,000 words was common in the mystery field. For examples of what an effective length that could be for a whodunit, consider the monthly short novels the old *American* magazine ran from the early 'thirties until its demise in the mid 'fifties. (My wife Rita and I edited an anthology of them, *American Murders* [Garland, 1986], now out of print but available from libraries and used-book dealers.) In recent years, regrettably, the length has become rare, but some paperback publishers have revived it by way of samplers to promote their authors.

Deadly Morsels (Worldwide, $6.99) includes four short novels, all with a culinary background, from established series. I found three of them enjoyable enough to try a full-length entry, though only one such was readily at hand. Much the best in prose and character development, if only so-so in plot, is old pro Steven F. Havill's "Red or Green?" about now-retired New Mexico sheriff Bill Gastner. Takis and Judy Iakovou's "Another's Curse," about Georgia restaurateurs Nick and Julia Lambros, is a cleverly plotted, low-key diversion that includes along with food that other cozy staple, pets. Peter Abresch's lively and amusing albeit padded "Sheep in Wolf's Clothing," about Elderhostel sleuths Jim Dandy and Dodee Swisher, finishes with a bizarre solution, unlikely but adequately prepared for, and a deeply felt religious message. (Below, a novel in the series is reviewed.) Though the gangster plot of Jane Rubino's "Cake Job," about journalist Cat Austen, didn't grab me at all, there is some very funny stuff on specialty wedding planners.

*** Roger Jaynes: *Sherlock Holmes: A Duel With the Devil,* Breese, $19.95 hardcover, $7.95 trade paperback. The short

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novel is also an ideal length for Sherlock Holmes pastiches, as seen in two of the three stories in a new collection from an author best known as an award-winning sportswriter. The theme is the continuing duel with Moriarty, and Jaynes captures very well the prose and plotting style, plus the flavor of the characters and their late Victorian times. The puzzles are true to the era but sometimes transparent to contemporary readers, especially the shortest tale, "The Case of the Baffled Courier," which presents a "Red-Headed League" variation so obvious, Holmes's solicitor client surely should have seen through it.

*** Lisa Scottoline: *Dead Ringer,* HarperCollins, $25.95. Facing possible bankruptcy in tough economic times, Bennie Rosato's all-female Philadelphia law firm test the unfamiliar cutthroat territory of class-action law—and, of course, encounter murder, to which they are more accustomed by now. Bennie's outlaw twin sister, first met in *Mistaken Identity* (1999), also turns up to complicate matters. Scottoline's customary virtues —humor, knowledgeable legal maneuvering, unpredictable plot turns, and an unquenchable love of humanity—come through in a typically fine thriller. (Her previous novel, 2002's *Courting Trouble,* spotlighting Bennie's Ally McBeal-like associate Anne Murphy, is now available in paperback [HarperCollins, $7.99].)

*** William Bernhardt: *Death Row,* Ballantine, $25.95. The story begins with a teenage girl, the only member of her slaughtered family left alive, struggling to survive. A few pages later comes the run-up to lethal injection of a convicted killer loudly proclaiming his innocence. These early chapters are so harrowing, it's hard to imagine the latest novel about Tulsa lawyer Ben Kincaid will deliver Bernhardt's usual combination of suspense, comedy, clued puzzle, and liberal socio-political messages, but it does. An especially good example of the author's wacky humor: how an HMO turned a physician to quackery.

*** Francis M. Nevins: *Leap Day and Other Stories,* Five Star, $25.95. That I wrote the introduction won't stop me from recommending this fine second collection by another eminent lawyer-author. Most of the 14 (nine from *EQMM,* three from *AHMM)* are non-series tales, but three continuing sleuths, law professor Loren Mensing, con man Milo Turner, and policewoman Gene Holt, make one appearance each. To quote my introduction, Nevins's stories "represent his range of interests, from his legal specialty of intellectual property to Western movies to classical music, and above all his devotion to devious but reader-fair puzzle plotting." His substantial story notes are another plus.

** Susan Wittig Albert: *An Unthymely Death and Other Garden Mysteries,* Berkley, $14.

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Ten stories, with accompanying recipes and herbal lore, feature Pecan Springs, Texas, herb dealer China Bayles. Of the six that originally appeared on the *Country Living Gardener*'s Website, three involve murder, the others lesser crimes. The four new stories are mostly noncriminous. The gentle small-town charm and character touches don't completely compensate for the dearth of fair-play clues. (My garden-mystery consultant advises that the latest Bayles novel, *Indigo Dying* [Berkley, $22.95], is similarly more distinguished for its fascinating background of herbal dyes and strip mining than its rather routine mystery.)

** Nancy Fairbanks: *Chocolate Quake,* Berkley, $5.99. Food writer Carolyn Blue's exploration of the San Francisco culinary scene is interrupted when her militant feminist mother-in-law is charged with the murder of a women's center's business manager. Again Fairbanks delivers amusing prose, endearing characters, and interesting historical and culinary tidbits in service of a plot that comes up a twist short. (Nitpicks: Isn't the language one character's family was named after Tagalog, not Tagalong? And I hope no potential visitor to San Francisco will change plans in fear of periodic earth tremors strong enough to collapse your dessert.)

** Peter Abresch: *Painted Lady,* Intrigue, $24.95. If Jim and Dodee (see *Deadly Morsels* above) keep encountering murders on their Elderhostel tours, this one along the Santa Fe Trail, they risk being banned from the program. The main characters and some of their fellow travelers are delightful company; the transparently sincere religious messages will be inspiring to some and should bother nobody; and the author conveys a strong sense of the Elderhostel experience. The mystery of how the figure of a murdered Native American shaman keeps turning up unbidden in Dodee's watercolors is so tantalizing, you may doubt the solution can possibly live up to the problem. It doesn't, and the plot and action sequences are rich in hard-to-swallow elements, but the trip is still fun.

In 1913, a dozen years before his famous sleuth Charlie Chan debuted, Earl Derr Biggers published a first novel that would become famous in its own right: the newly reprinted *Seven Keys to Baldpate* (Wildside, $17.50), a light romance with an element of mystery in which a popular novelist holes up in a closed resort hotel in Upper Asquewan Falls, New York, to write a great novel, a change of pace from melodrama. Melodramatic events conspire to prevent him fulfilling his aims. The novel does not include the surprise twist George M. Cohan added for the stage version.

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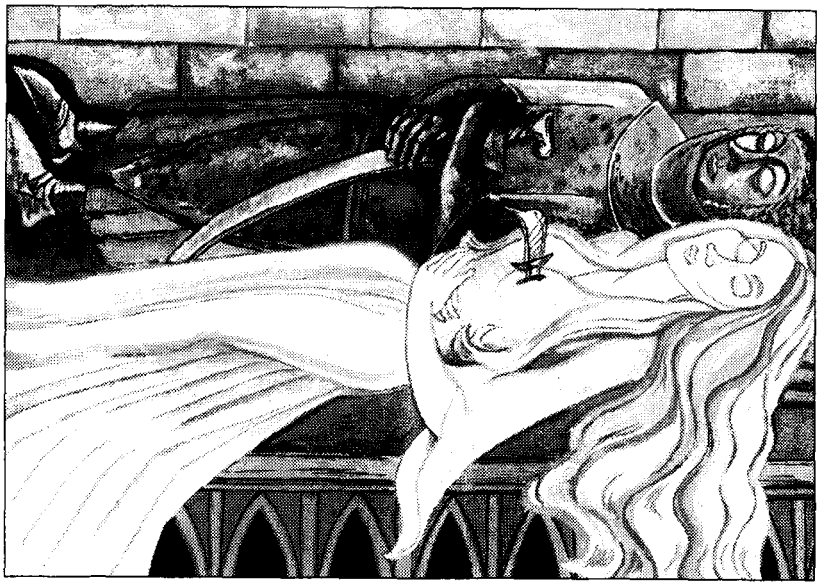

Art by June Levine

HERE LIES

by Barbara Cleverly

1.

The two bodies were lying side by side in the south aisle of the church of Tilbrook St. George. The figure on the right, an armoured knight, his hands folded in prayer, his feet resting on a lion, was impressive enough, but it was the pallid alabaster beauty of the lady at his side which took the breath away. Her delicate hands were peacefully folded below her breast, her feet rested on a tasselled cushion. The knight had lain here in this quiet place carved in white stone for nearly six hundred years. His lady was of flesh and blood and was newly dead. He had a dagger at his side; she had a dagger in her heart.

I might have run screaming from the church. I ought to have checked for a pulse. I did neither of these practical things. I stood and gazed. It occurred to me even then that I was reacting to the scene as I was intended to react, for, in that moment of terrified discovery, the macabre display was beautiful and full of meaning.

The early-morning sun angled through the stained-glass windows, stencilling the pament floor with a pattern of rich colour:

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vert, sable—how easily the heraldic colours sprang to mind in this theatrical moment—gules and azure, that rare blue still sometimes to be seen in untouched medieval churches. The seemingly peaceful couple were framed by a canopy of pale, sunlit stone. Sir John Hartest, survivor of the Battle of Agincourt, lay in plate armour, gauntleted hands resting on his chest, helmeted head encircled by a jewelled wreath. At his left hip on a richly sculpted baldrick was carved a dagger with an ornate gilded hilt. His features were serene; as the sunshine slid across his face he seemed almost to smile.

Barbara Cleverly's first novel, *The Last Kashmiri Rose,* was published in the U.K. by Constable & Robinson in 2001, followed by Carroll & Graf's U.S. release in 2002. With the book, now available in paperback, hailed as "spellbinding" by the *New York Times,* and two others in the same series, *Ragtime in Simla* and *The Damascene Blade,* out in hardcover, Ms. Cleverly has turned to short stories—this one featuring architect-sleuth Ellie Hardwick. ¶

At first sight the figure by his side appeared no less serene. Closed eyes, a dreaming face, her pallor a match for his alabaster. Her long fair hair had been arranged to frame her face before spilling over the edge of the tomb. The long white dress she was wearing had been carefully draped and folded; a girdle traced the sinuous line between her legs. I brought my eyes back to her breast and to the head of the dagger, very slightly to the left and very precisely into the heart.

I started as frozen emotion began to run again and the paralysing spell of the scene lost its grip. I looked away and then forced myself to focus once more on the dagger. But how could it . . . ? Surely not! I peered more closely at the hilt, professional curiosity taking over for a moment. And then I looked back at the one at Sir John Hartest's side. A representation of a vicious stabbing dagger, possibly of Spanish manufacture and designed to penetrate plate armour with a short, underhand stroke. A misericorde. The word meant compassion—pity. Such blades were often used to put dying soldiers out of their misery on the battlefield. What kind of sick trickery was I witnessing? The carved stone dagger and the wrought steel dagger were identical.

The Sleeping Beauty bewitchment of the tableau was fading rapidly now and reality was crowding in. Hasty and fearful, I looked round the church, belatedly considering the possibility of a murderer lurking behind the pews, under the velvet hangings, in the vestry—there were a hundred places to hide in a medieval church and I knew them all. My eye roamed over the nave and

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was caught by the grotesque and inquisitive features of a carved oak devil, one of the bench end figures, eager, apparently, to enjoy this violent event which had shattered his centuries of unwelcome peace. Imperceptibly, the sun changed its angle and a rosy glow began to creep over the white cheeks of the dead girl, infusing her with life before my disbelieving eyes.

With a dry rustle and a clearing of the throat, the ancient machinery of the church clock gathered itself and launched into its ten-o'clock strike. Not with a shriek, but with a very female whimper, I fled down the aisle towards the heavy oak door.

I'm an architect. I spend my life working in old churches and ancient buildings—that sort of architect. I've seen ghosts, even unwittingly addressed a few words to one or two, but I had never been terrified in an old building before. And yet it was terror that snapped at my ankles as I ran down the aisle, fought with the massive old box lock, and burst out into the blessed spring sunshine, the birdsong, and the cool breeze of a Suffolk morning. I ran down the path towards the safety of my old Golf.

In the deep shadow of the lych gate I cannoned off a hard body.

"Where are *you* rushing off to, I wonder?" came a far from friendly male voice. I looked up to see my client, the man with whom I had a ten-o'clock appointment. My client, Edward Hartest, or, as his letterhead had it: "The Honble. Edward Hartest, J.P." "Not fleeing the field already, are you? For God's sake—I'm only thirty seconds late! I take it you *are* my church architect?" He tapped the top of my hard hat. "Of course. Who else would wear one of these ugly things? Hang on—you're upset! Has something happened? Now look here, Miss . . . er . . . I don't know what's happened, but hysterics won't help. Pull yourself together if you can and tell me what's going on here!"

He smelled of hay and diesel oil. He was wearing an ancient checked shirt and jeans, the uniform of a farmer in May. I didn't like him much and I certainly wasn't going to be patronised by him. I glared. "Will you move out of my way, please! I've got to get to my phone!"

He stood aside, waving me past him with mocking formality, and watched me, quizzically enquiring and infuriatingly at ease, while I unlocked my car, reached into the glove compartment, and found my phone. With a very unsteady forefinger I stabbed out 999.

"Hello? Yes, police, please."

Pause.

"Police? There's a dead body in Tilbrook Church." I prayed the operator wouldn't take me for a hoaxer. "Yes, that's Tilbrook St. George, three miles west of the A140 and five miles south of Mendlesett." And I added ridiculously, "I suspect foul play." Where do such expressions come from? "My name's Ellie Hardwick. I'm

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the church architect. Yes, of course I can stay put. About fifteen minutes? As long as that? Okay. Yes, of course. Thanks."

I snapped shut the phone and looked at Edward Hartest. His astonishment and dismay were all that I could have asked for. Without a word he turned and began to run up the path to the church.

"Oy! Stop!" I called after him. "Mr. Hartest, you shouldn't go in there! Wait for the police!"

He stopped and waited for me to catch up with him. "Now, listen! It's *my* church and if some clown's dumped a body in there I've a right to know about it. If you're scared, you can wait outside." He paused for a moment and went on, "On second thoughts, you're right. I'd be a fool to go blundering around in a crime scene without a witness, so you'll have to be it. Come on!"

He tucked my arm firmly under his—partially as a support but more, I believed, to stop me running off again—pushed open the door, and marched me into the church. We set off to walk up the aisle, the strangest couple to undertake this walk together in the thousand years of its existence, I thought: middle-aged farmer, boots treading grass and earth up the smooth red Wilton, and me, a Lego figure in the firm's green overalls and white plastic hard hat.

"The table tomb," I whispered. "She's laid out on the tomb. East end, south transept."

He stood to gaze down at the scene which had held me spellbound moments before. I watched him closely. He made the sign of the cross and went on looking, drinking in every detail. An expression of great sadness came over him, sadness which burned away the irritation between us. It was clear the girl was known to him, possibly even well known.

"My God," he muttered, and again, shaking his head, "My God!"

"Do you know her? Family?" I asked diffidently.

"Yes," he said. "Well, almost. Let me present . . ." He gestured to the figures on the tomb. ". . . on the right, my ancestor, Sir John Hartest, first Baron Brancaster, and on the left, the mortal remains of the future Lady Brancaster, my son's fiancée. At least—she *was* the future Lady B., but not anymore, it seems."

I didn't know what to say. Polite phrases of condolence would have been out of place but he looked at me questioningly, expecting some sort of response.

"She's—she was—beautiful," I said hesitantly. "I think, no, I'm sure, I've seen her somewhere before. . . ."

"You'd have had to have been living on Mars not to recognise her," he said surprisingly. "This is Taro Tyler. She's staying with us."

"Taro Tyler! Oh yes, how stupid of me not to have seen it! It's just that . . . with her eyes closed . . . those wonderful green eyes . . . she's not so recognisable perhaps."

Those remarkable eyes now growing milky under their stiffening

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lids—I'd seen them smiling out from the side of every bus in London, working their magic in countless up-market TV cosmetics ads.

"Thank you. It's tactful of you to mention the eyes."

Was there irony in what he said? I didn't doubt it and it made me angry. Her eyes, lovely though they were, had received far less publicity than her famous breasts. Every man in the country knew their size—36D—most had run lustful eyes over them on page three of tabloid newspapers. It shocked me that, however obliquely, he should be calling up the memory as we gazed in fascinated revulsion at the rust-fringed puncture in that glorious, money-spinning bosom.

" 'On her left breast / A mole cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops / I' the bottom of a cowslip,' " he murmured, but he wasn't really talking to me.

"Why do you suppose there's so little blood?" I whispered, my eyes drawn to the red-brown patch encircling the dagger blade. "There's just the merest trickle."

"It's been expertly done. The dagger was placed with precision and left in the wound. It's a skillful job, a surgical job, not a wild, crazed stabbing. But perhaps it was just a lucky stroke?" He shrugged. "At any rate, I don't think we're going to find any blood-drenched overalls in the graveyard dustbin."

"But how do you get a girl to just lie there while you plunge a dagger into her heart? Or was she killed somewhere else and the body brought here and arranged like this? And where on earth would you come by precisely the same dagger as the old man's got at his side? That's a misericorde, I think. It's all so deliberate! Look at her hair. It's been arranged to fall like that. Her dress—someone's folded it. And what would Taro Tyler be doing wearing an outfit like that anyway? It looks medieval!"

I gasped as the connection struck me.

"Only just caught on?" he asked acidly.

"She's *meant* to look like—be a *replica* of—the original figure . . . the figure I was supposed to be inspecting with you this morning."

"I think so. Your firm sent some chaps last week to remove Sir John's alabaster wife, Lady Alienore. She was in need of remedial treatment. We called your boss, who said, 'Awfully sorry, I shall be away on holiday in Puglia but—tell you what—I'll send you my assistant. She's young and highly qualified, a sound art historian. Pretty girl, too,' he added. Recognise yourself ? I had the remains of the first Lady Brancaster placed over there in the corner on that tarpaulin." He nodded towards the bell tower and to an ordered pile of pale-gleaming fragments rising from which I could make out a single white hand pointing forlornly heavenwards.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I said, and for a moment it seemed horribly likely.

"No you're not," he said. "Have a thought for the Suffolk Con-

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stabulary. They'll have quite enough bodily fluids to put under their microscope without being distracted by extraneous and irrelevant ones from the visiting architect. Pull yourself together!"

He'd said it again! No one had told me to pull myself together since primary school. I breathed deeply, beginning sincerely to dislike Edward Hartest. I waved away the red spotted handkerchief he held out. "No thanks, Mr. Hartest. I find that, after all, my stiff upper lip is equal to the task of keeping back the vomit."

"Good show," he said. "Keep it on board. And look here, Miss Hardwick . . ."

"Ellie, call me Ellie," I said impatiently.

"Fine. And you might as well call me Edward. Now, look here, Ellie, I want you to note a few things before the police get here. I'm certain that we can rely on them to use the full range of their forensic techniques but . . ."

"I know what you're getting at. Not straightforward, is it? It's as though someone's left a challenge. If it weren't such a gruesome thought, I might even say someone's playing a game."

"Yes, and I have a feeling I may know the identity of this joker. Do you see, over there, just below the scrolled edge—don't touch it, for God's sake!—there's a smudge."

"A fingerprint," I said firmly. "In blood!"

We looked at each other in silence for a moment until outside in the real world, one by one, cars crunched to a halt.

A Detective Inspector Jennings accompanied by a detective sergeant and a uniformed officer marched competently in through the door and up the aisle. He made his way towards us, holding up his credentials for our inspection, unnecessarily, it seemed, as the Hon Edward greeted him with an easy, "Oh, hallo there, Richard." After briefly establishing who I was and my role in the discovery of the body, the inspector courteously invited us to get out of the church by the fastest route and to avoid treading again on the carpet. I noticed that he spoke to Edward Hartest formally but with an underlying deference and I remembered—not only Honourable but also J.P., a local magistrate. This heir of an ancient family moved smoothly into action and, replying with just the right blend of formality and charm, informed the inspector that we would leave the scene of crime clear for the investigating officers and go to await his questions in the comfort of the library at Tilbrook Hall, where he trusted Richard would be able to join us later for coffee. Edward picked up my briefcase, put a chivalrous arm around my shoulders, and led me out into the sunshine.

Through the thin cotton of my overalls I could feel the solicitous arm shaking perceptibly.

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As we left, uniformed policemen were cordoning off the churchyard with plastic tape, one firmly standing his ground and denying access to an indignant, weather-beaten lady. "Young man, kindly move aside. I *always* do the flowers on a Wednesday!"

We seemed to be in an earlier world where deference to the squire was in order. I was impressed to see the scene-of-crime officer, red-faced but determined, stand his ground. "But not *this* Wednesday, I'm afraid, madam," I heard him say cheerfully.

A middle-aged figure, bespectacled and distinguished, climbed out of his Volvo, an assistant carrying his medical bag. The pathologist? "Got a little local difficulty, I hear, Edward?" he said easily.

"Local, Gordon, but I'm not so sure about little," said Edward.

Am I the only outsider here? I wondered resentfully. *They're all paid-up members of the Tilbrook St. George Self-Appreciation Society (Founded 1415)!*

The Hall was only five minutes' walk from the church. A gable end was visible above the surrounding trees and the five-shafted cluster of a chimney stack broke the skyline. Fifteenth-century was my first impression. A fine house. A gracious and welcoming house. I was shown into the library and a tray of coffee was placed at my elbow while Edward went off to break the news of the death to his son Rupert, "still abed" according to the housekeeper, and to his father, the current Lord Brancaster, an invalid who kept to his room. I passed the time taking from my briefcase the file on Tilbrook Church. Meticulously kept, the notes went back for thirty years. The building was in first-class condition, scrupulously kept up by the Hartest family. The damage to Alienore had been caused by an overzealous Victorian insertion of iron cramps and I had been called in to advise on the restoration. Intrigued to see the original appearance of the tomb, I spread out on the library table a set of black-and-white photographs we kept as a record in the file.

I looked and looked again at the pictures of the original Alienore, intrigued and mystified. I compared them with the startling scene I had just witnessed and, unbelieving, I began to arrive at a shocking conclusion. And then there was the Latin inscription running round the tomb. This reinforced my theory. The words were an easily translatable, common enough formula until I got to the last word.

What I saw written there was a motive for murder. And it had been there, unremarked, for nearly six hundred years.

I decided it would be a good idea to scramble out of my unglamorous overalls, though the jeans and yellow T-shirt this manoeuvre revealed were hardly more appropriate to the leather bindings, the gilded titles, and the polished oak of these gracious surroundings. Even so, I was more suitably dressed than the young man

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who now appeared in the doorway. Rupert Hartest looked every inch the bereaved fiancé. Stunned, inarticulate, dressed in a white bathrobe, his black hair flopping unbrushed and still damp from his shower, he stood and stared at me.

He was very good-looking in a brooding, dark way, and very young. I guessed that he was probably in his early twenties and a year or two younger than me. He joined me at the table and listened in silent horror to the story I had to tell him, dabbing his eyes with the trailing end of his bathrobe. When I fell silent, he sniffed, and whispered gruffly, "Oh, Taro! Consistent to the last! You silly little trollop!" He paused for a moment, smiled a crooked smile, and added, "But what an exit!"

Deeply puzzled, I pretended not to have heard, and said, "Your father thinks he knows who's responsible . . ."

"Theo Tindall," he said bitterly, "that's who he's got in his sights. The photographer. Taro's manager, friend, ex-partner, and purveyor of strange substances to Taro and others—including myself." He shook his head as though he could shake out memories. "Hateful man! He was staying with us, too, just for the week—at Taro's invitation, of course. Perhaps I don't need to say that he's disappeared. Room's empty, though his things are still lying around all over the floor. Mrs. Rose, our housekeeper, says he and Taro went out together in his car early this morning at about seven o'clock."

I told him about the bloody fingerprint on the tomb.

His relief was obvious. "Well, they'll nail him then, no sweat." He paused for a moment, thoughtful, and then added, "Funny, though . . . what possible motive could there have been? He had every reason to keep Taro in good health. He made a lot of money out of her. He discovered her and flogged her talents to the media. Took a large cut of the proceeds. He didn't seem to resent her getting engaged to me—he introduced us, in fact, and with all the publicity she could whip up over the society wedding, he, they, stood to make even more. Odd, that. . . ."

He poured himself a cup of coffee and turned his attention to the photographs. His father had already described to him the scene of death but he made me go over again the details of the appearance of the corpse. "The dagger," he said finally, pointing to the carving. "There's a real one in a trophy of arms in the drawing room, the twin of this. I looked in before I came to the library. It's missing. A misericorde, you're right. And I bet if I looked in the chest on the landing I'd find that a long white nightgown and a pair of white satin ballet shoes have gone missing, too."

"But do you think she changed into them willingly? Was Taro part of the impersonation, do you think?"

"Certain of it! Just the sort of offbeat humour she went in for. Bet it was all her idea. I can imagine what they were both up to!

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What a laugh! Dress up as the first Lady Brancaster and pose, probably with a lot of bosom showing, on the family tomb which somebody has conveniently cleared for them. Theo snaps away and flogs the result to . . . oh, any one of a hundred papers. You can imagine the headlines! Blast them!"

"But wouldn't she have been a bit more circumspect . . . I mean . . . have held off from offending the ancient family she was about to marry into? Surely?"

Rupert snorted. "She had no respect for that sort of thing. She was one of those who cheered when the hereditary peers were kicked out of the House of Lords. I've always thought it was Taro and her sarcastic tongue that gave Grandfather his heart attack."

"Is that possible?"

He grimaced at the memory. "It happened at her first dinner here. She said something deliberately calculated to get up Grandfather's nose and then announced that she and I were engaged to be married and he'd better get used to hearing her opinions. She declared that she'd make every effort to talk me out of taking up the title when the time came. And even if I did take it up, she'd make sure any children we had were daughters so it would die out. Bluffing, of course, but the old chap's heard of test-tube babies and DNA and all that, and I think he believed she could do it. Poor old bloke sent for his doctor and went to his room. He hasn't come downstairs since. Doc says he's got a heart condition and has to avoid stress. He's over eighty now. Seems a bit strange in these days, perhaps," Rupert looked at me assessingly, wondering whether he need explain, "but he really is obsessed by—lost in—family history. Heraldry, pedigrees . . . His family motto . . . *our* family motto . . . is 'Who dies, if Hartest live!' "

I must have looked bewildered because with an apologetic smile he said, " 'To hell with everyone else—so long as Hartest survives.' Nice!"

Rupert's eye flicked to a photograph on the mantelpiece and I went over to look at it. Three generations of the Hartest men were lined up on the lawn, smiling, relaxed, at the camera.

"There, you see, until the last few weeks Grandpa was always fighting fit—*literally* fighting fit! He was a commando in the War and kept himself in shape. Tried to teach me and Dad all his skills. More successful with Dad—he was in the Coldstream."

"Are you a soldier, too?"

"I *was* for about eighteen months. Tried it for Grandpa's sake. Went through the motions. Got out. It wasn't for me. I'm afraid I'm more the arty type, like my mother was. She died five years ago."

"And in spite of all Taro had done, you were still prepared to go ahead with the marriage?" I couldn't hide my incredulity and disapproval.

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His face softened. "You never knew her, did you? It's hard for those who didn't know her to understand. She was magic . . . well, she magicked me, anyway. She was wild, ruthless even, and she could be a ferocious little bitch—I knew it. But the magic made all that of no concern. *Made!* Christ! It continues to work! She's gone—but I can't believe it.

"I loved her. And there was another reason. She was pregnant. Not very, but enough to make us name an earlyish date." He sighed. "No illegitimate children acknowledged in the Hartest family for six hundred years. Not going to start now, though Taro wouldn't have cared, I suppose."

He was silent, deep in thought, and then he began to fidget. "Look, Dad'll be down soon and he won't be amused to see me still in my bathrobe. He thinks I'm pretty dissolute. . . . I'll just go upstairs and get kitted out. Stay here, I won't be a minute."

I was left alone but for the company of a Jacobean Hartest whose harsh white face under a black periwig stared down at me watchful, austere, and calculating from its gilded frame. I felt a sadness so oppressive that I put my head in my hands and tried to force back tears. Two innocent lives had been lost on that marble slab this morning. The girl and her unborn child were unknown to me, but I mourned them. And underlying the sorrow was a barely understood suspicion of the Hartest men and their motives, suspicion not unmixed with fear. I looked at my watch and wondered how much longer I would have to wait here. I found I really didn't want to have any further dealings with this family. Three generations of trained killers were loose in this house and one of them was determined enough and ruthless enough to have got rid of an inconvenient little trollop. I looked again at the photograph of the table tomb, at the frozen features and flowing hair of the lovely Alienore, and I understood that an ancient tragedy had sent its echo on through the centuries to be replayed in front of my eyes this spring morning.

2.

How soon could I get away from this place? I listened anxiously for the sound of a police car. My thoughts were redirected by Rupert. He slipped back into the room and tapped a finger on one of the photographs of the Lady Alienore.

"Always puzzled me, this," he said. "I've spent hours in church on Sundays looking, enchanted, at this figure, and there's something about her I've never understood. Dad says you're an art historian? Well, tell me, Ellie." He indicated the flowing hairstyle of the stone image. "In all the other table tombs I've seen, the ladies have their hair gathered up into a headdress. Why is this one different?"

Should I tell him? Would he want to hear? I've never been able to keep knowledge to myself. "That's the key to the whole mystery,

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Rupert," I said. He looked genuinely at a loss so I went on, "In those times it was the fashion for women to have their hair dressed and caught up in concealing coifs . . . if you were a respectable, married woman, that is."

"But Alienore was all that! What are you trying to say?"

"That in those days this sumptuous spread of tresses was seen as the outward badge—the emblem, if you like—of a common prostitute. Whoever put this here knew it and wanted succeeding generations to know it, too. Sir John was announcing this to the world in sculpture. Vilifying his wife for eternity. An obscure but neat way of getting his own back for what he saw as his wife's shortcomings."

"Interesting theory, but a bit thin, I think. Impossible to read that much into a hairstyle."

"Perhaps, but there's something else. Look here . . . and here . . ." I pointed to the inscription which ran around the sides of the tomb. "Know any Latin, Rupert?"

"Enough," he said. "This, at any rate—I've known it for years." He started to translate the lines about Sir John, his date of death and age at death.

"It's the short statement about Alienore that's important," I said.

"Easy," said Rupert. "*'Hic iacet Alienora Iohannis Hartestis uxor.'* That means 'Here lies Alienore, wife of John Hartest.' "

"But that's not the end of the sentence. My firm is nothing if not thorough, and back in the past someone must have thought he was not doing his job properly if he failed to check out the condition of the fourth side of the tomb."

"But you can't see it. It's hidden—it's right up against a half-height run of panelling."

"As I said—we're thorough. Someone must have taken down a bit of the panelling to observe the north face and recorded what he saw in a photo—this one."

"There's a bit more Latin," said Rupert, surprised. "But you've got me this time. I can't translate that."

"I can," I said slowly. "It's a continuation of the inscription about Alienore. The whole thing reads: *'Hic iacet Alienora Iohannis Hartestis uxor et meretrix.'* A slap in the face from beyond the grave."

"Ellie—please stop showing off and tell me—what the hell does *'et meretrix'* mean?"

"It means *'and harlot.'* It says, 'Alienore—wife and harlot.' It means, Rupert, that Sir John considered his wife a—what did you say earlier?—a silly little trollop."

We looked at each other steadily for a moment. The fire crackled. Somewhere a clock struck eleven.

"What are you saying?" Rupert's voice was smooth and quiet.

"I'm saying that for some men—for some families—the idea of the purity of the line was very important. We'll never know whether

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your ancestor went as far as killing his lovely young wife—not unknown in those days—but the legitimacy of his offspring would have been vital to him. If Alienore had been pregnant—inexplicably pregnant—and don't forget that these old knights were quite frequently away from home, for years on end sometimes—then horrors might ensue on his return. If he suspected that the child was not his, he might well have murdered her."

He listened without comment. We both knew I was really talking of Taro.

"Of course, we wouldn't have a problem nowadays," he said confidently. "DNA testing will sort out any paternity question."

"After the baby's born," I said, "and by then it's too late if it's been accepted into a family which declares it never recognises illegitimate children."

"You're saying that Taro was killed for a family reason. By me, in fact?"

Before I could answer, Edward strode into the room. He had changed into a black jersey and light linen trousers. I stared. I had been too quick to write him off as a waxed jacket and wellies type. He was slim and tall with stronger features but the same floppy hair as his son. An impressive man.

"Dad!" Rupert greeted him. "How did he take it? Is he all right?"

"Of course. What would you expect? He took it well. His heart may be a bit dicky but there's nothing wrong with his mental equipment. Steady as ever."

"Thank God for that. But Grandpa's going to need all his bottle if what your architect here has worked out turns out to be correct." He threw a challenging smile at me. "She's solved our crime. Move over Dick Jennings—you've been superseded by an art historian. And I grieve to tell you, Dad, it's down to you or me. Come and look at this."

Edward smiled bleakly and came to join us at the table. If my guesses were correct, with Rupert on one side and his father on the other, I was shoulder to shoulder with a murderer. But on which side? A further chilling thought occurred to me—could they *both* be involved? At Edward's invitation I went haltingly through my theory again.

"A family thing. Yes, I believe you could be right, Ellie," Edward said. "But have you considered that if Rupert is *not* the father of the child . . ." He turned to Rupert and said almost apologetically, "Oh, come on, let's face it, Rupe, old son, you were out of your skull for most of the time till a few weeks ago and I don't think you had a clue about what was going on in Taro's life . . . then someone else is the father. That prat Theo what's-his-name? Imagine—Taro tells him she's marrying Rupert and giving up the modelling business. He's about to lose his cash cow and his prospective child.

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'Okay,' he tells her, 'I'll bow out of your life, but how about one last shoot to send me on my way? A golden handshake from the glossies . . . I've had a terrific idea for a location. . . . And we'll be able to stuff it up these Hartest prigs! Imagine their faces when they see the pics!' How does that sound? But instead of a *photo* 'taken from life,' the model herself was taken from life! Revenge killing? Spite? Crime of passion?"

He was interrupted by Mrs. Rose, who just had time to announce Detective Inspector Jennings when he came striding into the room. Settling down with a cup of coffee and placing his mobile phone importantly on the table in front of him along with his notepad, he smiled round at our small group. I thought he looked keen and energetic and clever. I just wished he had been a little less impressed by the Hon Edward.

"I'll be needing your individual statements, of course, and when I've finished what I have to say, I'll send in an officer to take them. There have been developments," he announced with satisfaction. His phone rang as though on cue and he snatched it up and listened eagerly.

"You've got him? Good lad! Where?" He looked at us and, involving us in his triumph, "In his flat? You don't say! He must have burned some rubber down the A12. Flinging his passport into a bag? He's no Ronnie Biggs, is he? Get the prints, did you? What's his story, then?" He listened avidly, occasionally chortling, occasionally cursing gently, and finally switched off.

Stretching out his legs and leaning back in his chair, he announced, "I'm pleased to say we've made an arrest. My London colleagues have picked up Theo Tindall in his Islington flat and charged him with the murder of Taro Tyler." He looked at his watch. "Has to be a record." Then he added thoughtfully, "Almost seems too easy . . ."

We didn't interrupt him and he went on, "We got a statement from Mrs. Wentworth at Parsonage Cottage. Very good witness. She keeps an eye out for visitors to the church; in fact, she unlocks at six A.M. and locks up again at dusk. She thought it was odd that tourists would come roaring up at seven so she took down their details, car make and number, the lot. Two people went into the church carrying a couple of bags. She noticed the girl was dressed 'like a bride' and then she recognised them. Those guests at the Hall who'd giggled all the way through Matins last Sunday. And gossip was that the girl was a model. Well, that made sense, didn't it? Catching the morning light for one of those fancy photos. Mrs. Wentworth went off watch. She noticed that the car drove away half an hour later, going rather fast, but then, young men always drive like that, don't they?"

"We noticed a bloody fingerprint on the tomb," Edward said.

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"Yes, we've got it. That'll be checked by the morning, but he admits it's his. Swears he didn't murder her, but his story's a bit thin. Says they were all lined up for the shot, she spread out on the tomb in her draperies, when the light shifted and he decided he needed a different camera and a bit of extra equipment from the car. He nipped out to get it and came back minutes later to find her dead. Denies taking the dagger to the church as part of the props and says the first he'd seen of it was the handle sticking out of the body. *Says* he tried to pull it out. Well, he would, wouldn't he? So there'll be prints there as well."

He paused again, thinking aloud. "Neat, all sewn up, you might say. Yes, very neat and tidy . . . Anyway, he got some blood on his hand, panicked, and ran off. Says he felt sure someone was in the church watching him and he thought he might be next. We'll need a motive, of course. If he *did* take the dagger from the Hall, then it was premeditated. But I'd feel easier if we knew *why* he'd done it. Wondered if you . . . ?"

"Oh, yes, Richard. I think we can supply you with a motive," said Edward smoothly.

And it was at this moment that there came the sound of a shot from the floor above. My three companions all jumped to their feet, looking at each other with total dismay.

Rupert was the first to move. "Grandpa!" he yelled. "That's from Grandpa's room!" and he started to the door. Edward and the inspector ran after him. I lingered behind just long enough to cast an eye over the inspector's belongings abandoned on the table. There was something I had to find out without anyone noticing. Shifty but determined, I picked up his mobile and, one eye on the door, began to scroll through his phone book. I told myself what I was doing was in the interests of justice—and self-preservation.

I scrambled after the others, hurrying up the staircase and along a corridor. Rupert burst into the room at the end and we all gathered behind him, keeping to the doorway. Peering over Jennings' shoulder I could just make out the body of an old man wearing a camouflage-patterned sweater and dark cord trousers slumped across his desk under the window. A service revolver lay on the floor by his right hand. The wall to his left was spattered with the contents of his head. Edward put an arm around his son and hugged him, both men's faces white with shock.

Jennings went into action. "Stay back," he said unnecessarily. He went to the desk and went through the automatic and superfluous gestures of checking the body for vital signs, then abandoned this ritual and noticed the arrangement on the desktop. A large iron key was acting as paperweight for a single sheet of handwritten paper. He looked at it and waved to Edward. "Come

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and have a look at this," he said quietly. "Looks like a suicide note and it's addressed to you."

Edward went forward and began to read aloud. He needn't have done this and I wondered why he was involving us all in this way. More showmanship? I thought so.

"My dearest Eddie, forgive me. I killed that friend of Rupert's. Woman was a strumpet and did not deserve the honour he was about to bestow on her. I came down for a nightcap late last night and heard her planning—with that appalling photographer chap who's been infesting the place—to defile the family tomb. Couldn't have that. I got to the church before them and let myself in through the vestry door on the north side using this old key. No one saw me. I hid, and when the chap left the church to fetch something from his car I stabbed the girl with the dagger I'd taken from the display in the drawing room. I waited to terminate his miserable existence as well—I meant to snap his rabbit neck—but he was off like a flash. I couldn't have caught him. I'm a bit decrepit these days but not as bad as I've been making out. In fact, I was faking my condition. I took to my room to avoid meeting this dreadful pair of limpets. I trust Rupert will learn from this fiasco and one day he'll be able to find a decent girl. God bless you both. 'Who dies?' Eh?"

As he read I looked around the room, anywhere but at the poor, shattered body. I took in the military neatness of his arrangements, the bed already made, the books lined up on his bedside table. The only untidy item in the room was a pair of pajamas lying in a crumpled heap on the bed. A discordant note in this precisely organised room. Fearful of what I might find, unnoticed by the others, I edged nearer, put out a hand, and touched them. I looked at the carafe of water and the bottle of pills on the bedside table and I moved around until I could see the label and the contents. What I saw confirmed all my fears.

Hours later, after a sketchy lunch in which no one was interested and a tea tray in the library which seemed to have become the operations room, the police had finally left. Statements had been taken, frantic phone calls made, ambulances, police vehicles, pathologist, and undertaker had gone about their business, and I hoped that in the Islington nick someone had thought to release Theo Tindall.

It had been a long, weary, and sickening day, but finally a weight seemed to have lifted from Edward Hartest. He poured me a glass of sherry, having, on one pretext or another, prevented my leaving for the last two hours. "Nonsense! Not in the way at all! I can never apologise enough for dragging you into such a grisly family scene but we've both been glad you were here. Kept us in touch with sanity in an increasingly mad scenario, you might say. And you were right, you see, Ellie, about the motive. Purity of the line. It meant a

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lot to my father." He fell silent, plunging into painful thought. Recovering himself he said, more brightly, "Ellie . . . now that's short for Eleanor, isn't it? And funnily enough, that's the modern spelling of Alienore. Did you know that? Your surname's Hardwick? One of the Norfolk Hardwicks, are you? Then your family are apple growers? You must know a good deal about apples."

Suspicious and disturbed by his change of tone, I admitted that I did.

"Look, before you go you must have a stroll in the orchard with me. The blossom's wonderful at the moment. We've got some very special old strains that might interest an expert."

The thought of wandering under the trees in the twilight with the handsome dark lord was making my knees quiver. I tried to fix an interested smile and appear relaxed but all my senses were screaming a warning.

For two men who'd just suffered a double bereavement, Rupert and Edward were charming hosts. But it was more than noblesse obliging them to put on a good show—they were hanging on to me because my presence was a necessary buffer between them. When I had gone they would be left alone with each other, with recriminations, perhaps, and with much sorrow. For the moment I presented them with the need to behave normally. I got to my feet, packing up my bag. I had to take my leave carefully, raising no suspicion that I knew a huge injustice had been done and that one of these charming men was a killer, a killer with the deaths of a young girl, her unborn child, and an innocent old man on his conscience.

Neither man had an alibi for the time of the murder. Rupert was thought to have been in bed and had made a rather stagey (in my opinion) appearance in his bathrobe at ten-thirty. Edward had told the police in his straightforward way that, as usual, he'd been working by himself in the fields since six o'clock. If the inspector cared to ask, any one of what he called "his chaps" might be able to state that they'd spotted him out in the croft, mending the tractor. Somehow I thought his chaps might be queuing up, tugging their forelocks, to do just that.

The killer was probably trying to calculate how much I had worked out for myself, assessing from my behaviour how urgently I was trying to get away to raise the alarm, perhaps even working on a scheme to ensure my discretion—or my silence.

Rupert scrambled to his feet and firmly took my bag. "No, it's all right, Dad. Ellie won't want to be wandering round a damp orchard at this time of night. We're not all apple freaks, you know! I'll walk you to your car, Ellie . . . No, I insist! It's a bit dark down the lane now," he said. "You left it in front of the church, didn't you?"

And we set off together to walk down the tree-lined driveway to the church.

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Distantly, the reassuring sound of the blue and white plastic ribbons outlining the crime scene flapping in the evening breeze was reaching my ears. We crunched on in silence down the gravel. Not much further to go. My hand curled round my car keys in the right-hand pocket of my jeans. Fifty yards.

At the bottom of the drive, Rupert pulled me into the deep shadow of a lime tree, turned to face me, and put two hands on my shoulders. "You know, don't you?" he said abruptly.

I shivered under his hands. "Yes, I do," I said defiantly.

"And I want to know what you're proposing to do about it."

Keeping my voice level and unconcerned I said, "Nothing. That's what I'm proposing to do. Who would listen to *me* in the face of so much evidence pointing so convincingly in a different direction? You've said it, Rupert, or was it your father?—'It's a family thing.' You can sort it out between you."

"How did you guess?"

"It was no guess. Sharp observation and intelligent deduction!" I couldn't let him intimidate me. I looked anxiously down the drive, trying to make out the outline of my old Golf. Could I outrun him if he got angry? Probably not.

"It was the pills that gave it away." (Better give him something to think about.)

"Pills, Ellie? What do you mean?"

"In your grandfather's room. All that stuff about his bad heart and being room-bound—no one considered he could have done the killing, but then in his confession he tells the world that it was all a bluff and, stiffening his old sinews, he does a commando-style exercise in the church for the sake of the family honour. Well, the police are happy they've worked out the bluff but they didn't think as far as a *double* bluff. The pill bottle by his bed, Rupert—it was half empty. He'd been taking whatever it was in there, all right. And what was in there—I looked at the label—was a heavy-duty heart-disease prescription. My aunt had the same thing. So, your grandfather was genuinely a heart-attack victim and there's no way he could have done what he confessed to. He was owning up to a crime he didn't commit because he knew who *had* done it and was taking the blame for someone very dear to him. Paying the bill. For the family. Making sure that Hartest lives, if you like."

"I don't know what to say. What can I do?"

He seemed suddenly helpless and disarmingly childlike.

"You know he's mad, don't you?" he said. "You'd have to be a bit mad, wouldn't you, to kill like that and be prepared to let an innocent man—*two* innocent men—take the blame?"

I considered this for a moment. "No, I don't think so. Just very focussed and pitiless. You and I couldn't do it, Rupert—we're the arty type, remember. But your father could—and did. 'Who dies?'

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Well, Theo Tindall for a start . . . He was thrown to the wolves. But, just in case the wolves weren't having any—and Jennings *was* beginning to make dissatisfied noises—even his own father . . . Yes, I think so . . . He told his father exactly what he'd done and, using this knowledge, the old chap cobbled together a convincing confession. He didn't have much time. He wanted to fire the shot while Jennings was in the house, I'd guess—a police witness right there on the spot. He hurried to write the confession and then thought of a corroborative detail—he got out of his pajamas, leaving them in a heap, and dressed himself up in camouflage gear to make it look credible. But his pajamas were still warm . . ."

I paused for a moment, mind racing. "Would we be really mean, Rupert, if the thought crossed our minds that this was just what Edward calculated would happen? You know your father best—would he consider it no more than right and just that the old should sacrifice themselves for the young? I think that was in his philosophy and your grandfather's. They saw you couldn't find the strength to extricate yourself from what they considered an impossible situation and they acted. I can't say they were doing it for *you* because in their thinking the individual is only a link in a chain. They were making sure a six-hundred-year-old chain wasn't broken."

"So that's what I come down to," said Rupert unhappily. "The weak link in the family chain."

Lightening my tone, I went on, "As for what you do now . . . well, you go out and find yourself a respectable girl with a good name, marry her, have several male offspring, and you'll find he need never kill again."

I spoke flippantly but his reaction was unexpected.

Rupert smiled a devastating smile, reached out a forefinger, and gently stroked my cheek. *"Ellie's* a good name," he murmured, leaning closer.

I managed to fight down a shudder of fear and even retained my slight dismissive smile. The two Hartest men might have different methods of ensuring my silence—murder or matrimony—and on the whole, Rupert's method was to be preferred, but in the end they shared the same compelling family motto and the next victim they were planning to ride roughshod over was me. I had decided some hours ago to adopt a motto of my own. *Semper vigilans* wouldn't be bad, I'd thought . . . always on the alert.

"And I think you're very attractive," Rupert was whispering. "It didn't take me long to work out that you were actually a strong girl, dependable, *discreet . . .* "

I swallowed and in what I imagined to be a light and friendly tone I agreed with him. "Oh yes. All that. And clever, too. It didn't take *me* long to work out that the name 'Eleanor' in conjunction with the name 'Hartest' is not a lucky combination. Goodbye,

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Rupert. I'll keep an interested eye on the announcements column in the *Times*. I may even turn up at your wedding!"

Truce? Standoff? He wasn't the tactician his father was. He let me get away.

Back in the safety of my Golf, I turned the key with shaking hand and said a quick prayer when the engine started. Two miles away on the busy, brightly-lit forecourt of an Esso station I stopped and took out my phone.

I dialled a number I'd scribbled down in the library on the inside of my wrist.

"Inspector Jennings?" I said. "Sorry to ring you at home. Ellie Hardwick here." ●

Pulp Art Covers

EQMM covers have undergone many changes over the past six-plus decades. From the early illustrations of Salter to the plain-type covers of the '60s to the celebrity photographs of the '80s, *EQMM* has changed clothes, as it were, to fit the fashions of the times. Recently, however, we've intentionally adopted the attire of an earlier era, using the dramatic, sometimes lurid, "pulp art" style so popular in the period between the world wars to convey at a glance the drama of the fiction we publish.

The term "pulp art" derives from "pulp fiction," which in turn refers to mysteries, Westerns, adventure, and science fiction that was printed on cheap paper for a mass readership from the 1920s through the 1940s. Great American writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Ray Bradbury were among those producing fiction in pulp format, and to match their brilliance, artists of the first rank appeared to illustrate the work.

During the pulp period, some sixty thousand paintings were produced to serve as book jackets and magazine covers. Today, only a few hundred of the original paintings remain, and they have been assembled in an exhibition for the Brooklyn Museum of Art which is expected to travel to other locations. Along with the original paintings, many of the printed book covers are on view in the show.

It was from the few surviving paintings of the period that *EQMM* was able to obtain two of its recent covers. Minnesota-born Norman Saunders, whose art appeared on our July and August '03 covers, began his career as an illustrator for Fawcett in 1927. After moving to New York in the '30s, he became a top cover artist for the pulp magazines and designed the earliest covers for paperback lines such as Ace, Ballantine, Bantam, Dell, and Popular Library. By the time of his death in 1989, his historic career had been recognized. Today collectors pay record prices for magazines, paperbacks, and comic books featuring the legendary artist. *EQMM* is fortunate indeed to be able to showcase his classic work.

In addition to reprinting the work of the classic pulp artists, *EQMM* has introduced several contemporary illustrators influenced by the pulp movement. This month's cover, like several others *(continued page 163)*

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IN THE HOLE

by Peter Sellers

Thomas had just finished a job laying asphalt with two guys called Pig Eye and Larry. They had resurfaced the parking lot of a tiny strip mall that hardly anyone used. Thomas thought that the owner would have been better off tearing the place down. He kept that to himself, however. Money was money, and he was in a bit of a hole at the moment, so any job was a good job.

Neither Thomas nor Larry actually knew anything at all about how to do the work required. They figured that was not a problem since Pig Eye claimed to have laid more asphalt than whores. They let him be the boss and did what he said.

2001's *EQMM* Readers Award winner, Peter Sellers, is back with his first short story since the award-winning "Avenging Miriam" (12/01). This one was inspired, he tells us, by his experience building decks. Mr. Sellers lives in Toronto, Canada, where he makes his living in the advertising business as a creative director. He is also the editor of several mystery short story anthologies. ¶

Thomas could not figure out how Pig Eye had come to that name. Pigs, as far as Thomas knew, had tiny hard eyes. Pig Eye's were wide and slightly bulging, as if he were in a constant state of surprise. When no better reason came to him, Thomas figured whoever had named Pig Eye was being sarcastic.

The job took three hot, hard days, and when they were finished Thomas looked at the patchy, uneven surface and reckoned that if Pig Eye had done as much laying as he claimed, most of those women must have been left highly unsatisfied.

The man who owned the plaza thought so, too, because after yelling at them for some time about what lousy excuses for pavers they were, he said he would pay half what he owed.

"Well, we never claimed to be any damn pavers," Thomas pointed out. "You asked us to do the job and we did. We never said we were competent."

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That cut no ice with the owner and they walked away with precious little to show for aching muscles, dozens of smarting burns, and shoulders peeling from the sun. They conferred briefly about whether or not they should get a lawyer and sue for the rest of their wages. Pig Eye claimed that he could handle the case himself, come to that. After all, he had been inside more courtrooms than courtesans. That settled it right there. They kissed the money goodbye and went to a tavern.

They found an old-fashioned place with only Molson Ex on tap, served in ten-ounce glasses at a price ripped-off asphalt spreaders could afford. They took turns calling for rounds, holding up fingers to show the waiter how many to drop.

The more they drank, the more Pig Eye talked about his life. He had done that pretty much nonstop for the three days they had worked. He kept yacking away no matter how hot it got. At the same time, Larry never opened his mouth. He didn't even seem to do that to drink. It was as if the beer were absorbed through his upper lip.

Thomas had met Pig Eye and Larry in a beer hall such as this one. Pig Eye had been proclaiming, in a loud voice, the merits of Canadian football. As he extolled names like Cookie Gilchrist, Royal Copeland, and Sam Etcheverry, a horde of NFL fans booed and threw French fries, salt shakers, and the odd ashtray at him. Thomas admired his courage if not his wisdom. Larry was right there, too, saying nothing, but keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings. He tried to protect Pig Eye by knocking away the most harmful projectiles.

When at last Pig Eye had given up and sat down with a cry of "Philistines!" Thomas went over to talk with him about it. He, too, was an admirer of the Canadian game, having played it in high school and for two years at college before leaving to seek the greener pastures that had eluded him ever since.

Pig Eye must have been sixty, his face pruned up by life and hard work in the sunshine. Larry was maybe half that, strong, tireless, and seemingly willing to do whatever Pig Eye told him. The three of them ended up doing a few small jobs, with the asphalting being the biggest. Thomas was hard-pressed to think of a time when Larry was ever far from Pig Eye. Certainly he was never out of earshot.

After about an hour, the smell of hot asphalt was starting to fade. Thomas got up to go to the men's room as much to get away from Pig Eye's blather for a few moments as out of necessity. When he came back, there was something radically different about the bar. It was quiet. Pig Eye had stopped talking, and not just long enough to draw breath, either. Nobody in the bar was saying anything. When Thomas looked where everyone else was

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looking, he understood why.

The woman standing in the doorway was the kind you dreamt about at two in the afternoon, when the heat of the steaming asphalt felt as if it would boil the flesh right off you. When the rake you were using to smooth down the blacktop felt as if it was made of pig iron, you started to imagine where you'd rather be. Usually anywhere would do. For Thomas it was always with a woman like this one: curvy, slender, dark hair to her shoulders with a wisp of it falling across one dark eye.

She moved from the doorway into the bar. Thomas recalled a line from a cheap detective novel he'd read once: "She walked the way money would if it had legs." He had always liked the line, purple though it was. Now he knew what it meant. Halfway to the bar, she turned and looked at Thomas. Her gaze was direct and confident. It didn't faze her a bit, Thomas realized, being in here and being ogled by men who had not been socialized to pretend they weren't staring.

"I'm looking for someone who wants to do a job," she said. Her voice had a hint of that smoke-and-whiskey sound that suddenly made a jazz song start playing in Thomas's head.

"We're all working men, here," he said.

She looked around and then back at him with an amused smile. "Working on what?" she asked. "Your fifth beer?"

Thomas shrugged. "It's a union thing."

"Then perhaps I'm in the wrong place. I need someone non-union."

She and Thomas looked at one another steadily. Finally Thomas said, "I don't mind being a scab."

Sitting at the bar, Thomas had another beer. She perched on the stool next to him and looked perfectly at home. Up close, it didn't take long to realize that her style and self-assurance were learned. She could walk into a place like this, no sweat, because she'd done it before. More than once, Thomas reckoned.

"So tell me about the job."

She sipped some kind of colored drink that she'd had to coach the bartender on how to make. "First, tell me, if you don't mind scabbing, are you prepared to do something illegal?"

Thomas smiled and shook his head. "I knew it had to be something like that," he said. "You've got yourself the wrong boy, darling. If you want to lead some poor sap around by his pecker and get him so dewy-eyed that he thinks you love him, and then get him to whack your old man so you can make off with the money, that's your business. But I'm not so naive, baby, not by a long chalk." He slipped off the barstool. It was too bad. She was good-looking, all right. He started walking back to where Pig Eye and Larry sat, still watching, Pig Eye still silent.

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"I admire your ethics," the woman said. "But you misunderstand me."

He turned back to her. "Do I?"

"Yes. It's nothing nearly so melodramatic. I need to have a large deck and hot-tub enclosure built. And I want someone who's prepared to do it without bothering about a building permit." She smiled pleasantly. "I'm prepared to pay well. But if that will compromise your morality, I understand."

Thomas was very clear in his own mind on what he would and would not do. He had always thought building permits for jobs like that were stupid. "How much?" he asked.

"How do I know you'll do good work?"

Thomas pointed over to Pig Eye and Larry, sitting side by side, slack-jawed. "They're my references. In fact, if the job's big enough, you may want both of them, too."

"Are they relatives of yours?"

"No, just associates."

She shook her head. "I only have the budget for one."

"It's me, then. What's the address?"

She gave him the details about where to be when, and when he asked for an advance, she hesitated only briefly before handing him one hundred dollars. "My name's Mary," she said. "I'll see you on Tuesday."

Thomas went back to his friends. "I got a little job," he said. "Take me a week, tops."

Pig Eye was finally ready to talk again. "Woman like that? Take you more than a week. I knew a woman looked like that once. Getting over her took me a lifetime."

"Yeah, well." Thomas did not wish to get Pig Eye started on recounting his romantic entanglements. He dropped fifty dollars on the table. "Get yourselves laid, boys. On me." As he headed for the door he figured that was not how the money would be spent, but at least his heart was in the right place. He went back to his room, hoping nobody was in the shared bathroom so he could shower and shave.

Mary lived in exactly the kind of house that Thomas had imagined. It was a large stone place with a curved drive and it took almost two minutes to walk from the road to the front door. Mature trees shrouded the house from the street. Thomas had bought himself a watch with part of the other fifty to make sure he was on time. He liked to be punctual, and prided himself on his ability to keep time in his head. He got the sense, however, that the margin for error on this job was thin, and the money was too good to risk.

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Thomas expected some butler from central casting to answer the door and was surprised when Mary did.

"Jeeves have the day off?" he asked.

"I don't believe in servants," she said.

"Just scabs," he replied with a smile.

"Only if they're not insolent." She stepped out of the house and shut the door. "This way." She took him out back and showed him the job site.

The backyard, like the front, was wide, deep, and secluded, with more of the same big trees. At least one tree's worth of dressed lumber was neatly piled behind the house along with several Sonotubes, concrete premix, and several pounds of nails. Leaning against the stack of lumber was a clamshell auger.

"What's that for?" Thomas asked.

"I thought you knew about doing this kind of thing. It's for digging the post holes."

"What I meant was, where's the power auger?"

"There isn't one. This is better for you. The work is very Zen." When he gave her an arch look, she shrugged lightly and added, "So I'm told. It's the way my husband wants it, anyway."

Thomas set down the tools he had brought with him. There was a hammer that he liked the heft of, a Lufkin tape measure, and a plumb rule that had been his grandfather's and of which he was particularly proud. Then he picked up the auger and gauged it. "Your husband at work?"

"He's out of town," she said.

Thomas nodded, wondering how long before the come-on started. He was no fool, and it wasn't as if a job that started in the backyard hadn't ended up between the sheets before. Oh well, he reasoned, it would come when it came. "Where are the plans?"

She unfolded a sheet of homemade drawings. They seemed to be to scale and he figured they would work, although he usually just winged it and hoped for the best. "All right. I better get down to it."

"If you need anything, I'll be inside," Mary said, but Thomas had already turned his attention to the job.

It took more than an hour to measure and stake the layout. It was going to be a big deck, thirty feet wide across part of the back of the house and twenty-four feet deep. One corner was to be trimmed at an angle with three steps leading down to what would be a flagstone patio. Thomas wondered if they would want him to install that, too. He hated working with flagstone, but he would do it if asked. Or perhaps he would subcontract the job to Pig Eye, who had probably done more flagstone than farmers' wives. The hot-tub area was at the far right as you stood with your back to the house, the structure to be elevated from the rest of the deck, with built-in benches on three sides. This, Thomas decided as he

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paused to look at the framework of string, was going to take more than a week. He picked up the auger.

The first holes were tough. The soil was largely clay, heavy and wet and clinging to the blade of the auger. Thomas lifted the device as high as he could, standing on tiptoe, and drove it into the ground, jarring his shoulders. He pulled the lever, closing the machine's jaws, then muscled the load of dirt out of the hole, dropped it, and went through the routine again. He had to go down three feet to be sure the concrete would be below the frost line and the cold weather would not cause the deck to heave. If a job was worth doing, Thomas thought, and he cursed his way through the third hole.

After ninety minutes, his shoulders ached and his shirt was off. As he finished the fifth hole, Thomas looked up. Mary was standing by the pile of lumber holding a bottle of beer and an empty glass. "I thought you could use this," she said.

"Thanks." She was wearing a halter top and a short denim skirt with plain brown sandals. Her limbs looked toned and smooth. Thomas tried to avoid looking at her, sensing that only trouble could come of it.

"Do you want the glass?" she asked. Thomas could feel the sweat rolling down his chest and arms, and he knew he looked good, the work causing his sinews to stick out. He could feel her looking at him in a way that was more than casual.

"It comes in a glass," he said, and drank half of it without coming up for air. The second half went almost as quickly, and then, with another "Thanks," he turned back to the job. A couple of minutes later, when he risked a quick glance around, she was gone.

Halfway through the fourteenth hole, Thomas's new pawnshop watch told him it was almost time to quit. The going had gotten easier now. The soil seemed looser and not as wet. Thomas figured he could finish the rest the next morning and then start mixing concrete. He lifted the auger and drove it down, pulled the handle, lifted, and released. Again, lift, drive, lift, release. And a third time. He lifted and drove the auger down. It stopped with a jolt that nearly shook it out of his hands.

Damn. Just what he needed at the end of the day. Thomas had been pleased by how few rocks there'd been so far: just some incidental stones that were easily dealt with. But as he poked around the bottom of the hole with the blade of the auger this rock felt like a mother. That seemed odd, because it had not sounded that big. There was more of a dull thud when he hit it, and not the usual sharp clang. Thomas fired the auger down a couple more times, from different angles, in case he was wrong. But no; the rock felt big and immovable. He would have to dig around it and pry it up.

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Thomas lifted the auger out and tossed it aside. He knelt beside the hole and reached down to the bottom with a trowel, scraping away some loose dirt. Then, with his hand, he felt around the edge to try and get a fix on how big the rock was. There was something odd about it, as if something soft were covering it—something soft and loose. Thomas looked down into the hole and at first wasn't sure if he had just been working in the sun too long. He reached in gingerly and pushed more dirt aside. There was no mistake. It wasn't a rock at all.

Thomas sat back on a pile of dirt and thought for a minute or two. The sweat dried on his body, and he wiped himself with his shirt before he put it back on. Thomas didn't know much about corpses. He'd gone out for a time with a woman who worked at a funeral home and who had shown him a couple up close, but that was a different thing. The body in the hole was fairly new, that much was certain. The hand and forearm were obviously a man's. Who was it? Who put him there? There was only one reasonable conclusion to which Thomas could come. Mary, Mary, how does your garden grow? He knelt at the side of the hole, shoveled a foot of dirt back in, and straightened up the site. He had never been one for leaving tools and equipment scattered around. That was unprofessional. He did the work slowly, taking time to square the stacks of lumber, thinking all the while about what his discovery might mean, and what he was going to do about it.

Finally, Thomas walked around to the front door and rang the bell. Mary answered, wearing more than she had worn earlier. "I'm gone for the day," Thomas said.

"It looks like you've made good progress," she said. If she had been looking out the window, Thomas wondered just how much she had seen.

"It's coming along okay. I'll be mixing concrete tomorrow."

"Very good," she said with an innocuous smile.

"Yeah, and after I get that poured I'll have to take a day off. Concrete takes about twenty-four hours to cure. Not as good to work on otherwise."

She seemed to accept this with equanimity. "You'll be back here Friday, though?" she said.

"As long as it doesn't rain."

"Of course." She was so low-key about the whole thing that Thomas decided to try what he thought was his bombshell.

"Oh yeah. I found a little glitch in the plans." There was no reaction, so he probed further. "They're a little off, and I gotta make an adjustment." He noticed a slight tightening of her eyebrows. "A few of the holes have to be made in different spots than the plans

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say. Otherwise the support won't be right." She pursed her lips and Thomas thought he had hit on something.

After a pause she said, "But if you make these changes the support will be better?"

He nodded. "Absolutely."

"Fine," she said, with no hint of concern. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Thomas went downtown and looked around a couple of places for Pig Eye and Larry, but didn't see them. In the end, it was just as well. He had some thinking to do and Pig Eye's constant yapping sometimes made thinking difficult.

For much of the trip Thomas had actually considered calling the cops. Then he began to think that there had to be something better to do than turning Mary in. He was still mulling over the decision when the bartender announced last call.

When he got there the next morning, Mary gave no hint that there was anything amiss. Thomas worked slowly, his mind half on the job and half on the body. There was still no sign of a living husband.

Thomas finished digging the remaining holes, changing the position of each one by six inches or so. After all, he'd told Mary that some adjustments needed to be made and he liked to think he was a man of his word. Sometime in the middle of the morning, Mary brought him a cup of coffee but they didn't exchange more than a few words.

By noon, all the holes were dug, and Thomas started on the concrete. He ran a hose from a tap that rose from the ground in the middle of one of the garden beds. Then he dumped a bag of premix into a wheelbarrow, added water, and stirred with a spade. As soon as one bag was mixed and shoveled into a footing he started on the next. It was hard work, but good for the shoulders, he told himself.

At one o'clock, Mary brought him sandwiches and a bottle of beer. "Thanks," Thomas said. He had taken his shirt off again. Dirt was embedded in the cracks of his hands, and concrete dust around his nails. He could have washed up with water from the hose, but he figured this was part of what Mary wanted to see: dirty, sweaty man eating lunch. It was something for her to chew on while the old man was away—or three feet under. Thomas still was not sure what to think.

Mary sat with him while he ate. "You're coming along well," she said. "Although it doesn't look like you had to move the holes around much."

"It wasn't as bad as I thought." Then Thomas decided to try a risky gambit. He figured when he asked her this, two things could

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happen: She would tell him a lie, or she would tell him to get off her property. Thomas was not averse to gambling. "So how long will your husband be gone?" he asked.

She surprised him. When she started standing up, he figured that was the end of the job. But all she said was, "I'm not sure. He tends to get buried in his work." Then she went inside again.

The sandwiches stoked Thomas up for the afternoon. In all the holes but one, he filled the Sonotubes three feet deep with concrete. The one with the body at the bottom he just filled with loose earth and put a skin of concrete on top, about two inches thick and easy to lift out. Then he set carport saddles in each of the footings, using a length of two-by-two to make sure they were level. That done, he cleaned up the site again and went to tell Mary he was going.

"And you won't be back tomorrow, you said."

"Right. Till it cures. I'll start building on Friday."

"Would you like some supper?" she asked.

That took Thomas by surprise, but he made a decision then and there. If that was her husband's body positioned to support part of the deck—and Thomas had no reason to think it wasn't—then he had no reason to fear that their meal would be interrupted.

He smiled at her. "Sure," he said. "I could use a bite."

The conversation over dinner covered all the bases Thomas had expected. His plan had been to reveal as much truth as seemed prudent and to make up the rest. It was strained at first. Thomas was not used to sitting on a carved wooden chair in a fancy dining room, dealing with more than one fork, drinking wine from cut glass.

"It's been some time since I saw a tablecloth that wasn't plastic," Thomas said. He'd meant it to sound joking, but from Mary's reaction it must have come out wrong.

"Relax," she said. "There's nothing to worry about now."

Gradually, he did begin to feel easier. He found himself telling more than he had intended about his life and the many things that, like napkin rings and champagne flutes, he had left behind.

Some of her questions bordered on rude, but Thomas had learned long ago not to take things personally. "You're not a derelict, though?"

He laughed. "I suppose I could have been. But I don't drink enough for that, I'm not crazy, I bathe regularly, and I shave most mornings. I have a fixed address, even if it's only a rooming house."

"How would you like to change that?" she asked. It took a moment for her meaning to sink in.

The next morning, Thomas went out back to check his work. The concrete was curing nicely and all the footings were still level,

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even the fake one. He had been concerned about how that might fare, but it looked as good as the rest.

Thomas was surprised by how the night had gone, though less by Mary's invitation that they spend it together than by the things he had told her. In the darkness, more small truths long held private had slipped free.

At the same time, he had not been able to get much information from Mary about her life. He had learned that her husband's name was Dennis Cuthbertson, who had inherited a lot of money and made still more with some on-line ventures. Right now, Mary claimed Dennis was away exploring the possibilities of a gold mine in Malaysia. Thomas figured that was as good a story as any.

The amount of Dennis in the house was what struck Thomas most as he sat in the dining room—or, for that matter, any other room. Dennis's presence could be felt everywhere. There were pictures of him in every room, on the mantel above every fireplace, on every bookcase, on every dressing table and nightstand. In all the framed images, there was something artificially sleek about Dennis, and Thomas wondered if he'd had face work done.

In one large room with floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides, the photos of Dennis sat on a baby grand—or, anyway, what Thomas took to be a baby grand. He was not sure he had ever seen one. The house was full of things like that: things that poor people did not own and rich people probably did not use—at least not for anything more than a fancy picture stand.

There was more besides. Walls were adorned with diplomas recognizing Dennis's accomplishments, letters of thanks from charities acknowledging his invaluable contributions, and articles about him that had been clipped or copied from newspapers and magazines. It was as if someone had created a shrine to Dennis. It was Mary's way of assuaging her guilt, perhaps. Thomas found the effect oppressive.

He did not take long to convince himself that his suspicions were correct: Mary had done away with Dennis, and now she was having a few laughs, slumming. Thomas imagined rich women did this a lot with men and boys who came to work the garden or clean the pool. This was not a problem for Thomas. He figured he would still get paid for building the deck, and perhaps get a little something more out of it besides. He just had to wait for the right moment to bring it up. "Oh, yeah, baby, I found something out back that, uh, I kinda gotta ask you about." It wasn't time for that yet, however.

In the middle of the night, Mary put the proposal to him. "Why don't you stay here? At least until the job's done."

"I didn't bring anything with me. No clothes."

"I think I can find something that'll fit."

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"No toothbrush, either."

"I've got a spare."

Thomas smiled to himself in the dark, thinking, *That was easy.*

Work went slowly over the next few days. Thomas decided to build the hot-tub end of the structure first, wanting to maintain access to the body as long as possible. He couldn't have told anyone exactly why, but he had learned to trust his instincts over the years and there was something nagging at whatever part of the brain got nagged by thoughts like that. There was more to Thomas's leisurely pace than that, of course. He was smart enough to understand that once the job was done, he would be sent away, and he wanted the situation to last as long as possible.

As the work went on, Thomas realized that he would often forget entirely that the body was there. He would be in the middle of doing something else and his glance would find the short footing. Then the image of the body at the bottom of the hole would come back to him, and he would wonder how long it had been gone. The ability of the human mind to shunt aside unpleasantness is a marvel, he thought.

Five days into the job, Thomas needed more supplies. Mary, or more probably Dennis before he died, had miscalculated the amount of nails required, and Thomas wanted stringers for the stairs instead of building them from scratch. He knew that store-bought stringers could be of doubtful quality, but they would make his job easier.

It was in the parking lot of the lumberyard that Thomas ran into Pig Eye and Larry. The two of them were helping a small-time contractor load his truck. Thomas knew they were there before he saw them, Pig Eye's familiar high-pitched voice coming from behind the truck.

"Working hard, boys?" Thomas asked as he came up on them.

"Hardly workin'," Pig Eye replied, looking surprised as ever to see Thomas.

It turned out that Pig Eye and Larry had spent the last few days hanging around at a couple of working-men's bars and prowling lumberyards, looking for bosses who wanted cheap labor for cash. They had picked up an hour here and two hours there, but nothing to write home about. Today they were a couple of strong backs for a while at twenty bucks a man. "This is the last of it," Pig Eye said. "No more work today and no prospects for tomorrow."

Thomas had always believed that good things got passed along and that you were wise to share your good fortune—as long as it cost you little and there was a chance of a bigger payback. As he looked at his two acquaintances, a notion struck him.

"Say, Pig, I got a proposal for you. You could make a couple bucks."

Pig Eye looked wary, as if he expected to be asked to donate a kidney. "What needs doin'?"

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"How are you at building decks?"

Pig Eye laughed. "I've nailed more decks than doxies." Later, back at Mary's house, Thomas had to look up the meaning of doxy in the Oxford dictionary, but at the time he just grinned and nodded. He'd been around Pig Eye long enough to get the drift.

Thomas laid out his scheme. "Since I been doing good on this deck thing, I thought I'd share the wealth. You cover for me a couple days, I'll pay you cash. You get fed, too."

"Me and Larry both?"

Thomas shook his head. "I don't think she'd go for that. Just one of you, but the pay's good enough for two."

Pig Eye looked at Larry and then back at Thomas. "I'll be the man for the job, then. When it comes to hammers, Larry there has no kind of proper feeling. He misses more often than not. Except if it's his thumb."

Larry frowned and looked hurt, but Thomas wasn't sure if that was because of Pig Eye's criticism or because he was being squeezed out of work so easily.

"Fine," Thomas said. He gave Pig Eye the address and told him not to show up before ten. "That's enough of a day. And I'll square it with the lady of the house."

Heading home, which is how Thomas had come to think of the big house with its curtain of cedars, pines, and tamaracks, he felt pleased with himself through and through. He was counting on Pig Eye to do the same kind of job on the deck as he had done on the parking lot. Moreover, Pig Eye did poor work slowly. This would delay the inevitable and actually add more time, because whatever work Pig Eye botched, Thomas would have to make right. Yes, Thomas thought, sometimes life could be just fine.

The next morning, Thomas was pleasantly surprised when Mary announced that she was going out for the day. This was good. It meant there would be no questions about Pig Eye on the job. Even if Mary threw a fit and she forced the situation back to the way it had been, it would still add a day—and you could do a lot in twenty-four hours if you planned it right.

Pig Eye showed up more or less on schedule. Once he had the job in hand, Thomas decided to relax. He made himself some coffee and sat reading the newspaper. When his attention began to waver, he tried watching television, but he could find nothing that captured his interest. He prowled through the house, looking at all the things that Mary and Dennis had accumulated in their life together and that were now hers. The volume and diversity of the stuff fascinated him. It also struck Thomas how quiet the house was. He had not noticed this before. The phone never rang, it seemed, and no one visited. Thomas aside, Mary was always there

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alone. These things had not fazed Thomas before, he was so full of thoughts of Mary. But now that he was alone, the circumstance settled on him and made him uneasy. There was something bothering him, but he could not put his finger on what it was.

Thomas felt irritable and restless and out of place in the big rich house. He missed working and regretted giving the job to Pig Eye. In the distance, he could hear the sound of Pig Eye driving nails. If he were closer, Thomas was certain he would be able to hear the old man's constant muttering, for he talked whether there was anyone there to listen or not. Thomas decided to go for a walk.

"I'm going out for a bit," Thomas said to Pig Eye. "You need anything?"

"A deck of smokes would speed the job along," Pig Eye replied.

Thomas knew the brand.

Thomas was gone for about an hour and a half. The house was in the kind of neighborhood where people did not duck out to the corner store for a quart of milk when they ran low. You got the chauffeur to drive the maid and they had to travel a mile or more. Some of the houses were so far apart, Thomas figured people drove just to visit the folks next-door.

Thomas walked slowly and, by the route he took, he figured it was more like two miles to the nearest store. With every step the unease tugged at the back of his mind. He picked up the cigarettes, got himself a lemonade to drink on the spot, and bought some chocolate bars to share later with Pig Eye. By the time Thomas started back, the sun was high and the heat was building.

Somewhere between the store and the house, the right course of action came to him. He realized that he could not stay at Mary's house anymore. There was too much Dennis there and not enough Mary. It was as if she were dead while Dennis's life raced exuberantly on.

That thought, coupled with the reality of the body at the bottom of the hole, kept flashing before him. It was clear evidence that he couldn't trust Mary and it put him in mind of the fact that, once the deck was built and she was tired of him, there was nothing to stop her from killing him, too. After all, if she could get away with murdering someone as appreciated and oft-photographed as Dennis, then killing someone like Thomas, consequence-free, would be easy. He had no connections in the world, except maybe to Pig Eye and Larry, and that link tenuous at best.

As Thomas approached the house, he saw Mary's car parked in front of the closed garage. There was another vehicle beside it, an expensive European car. It was the first car other than hers that Thomas had seen there. He had hoped to be back before she was,

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so that Pig Eye's presence would not come as a surprise, but it was too late to do anything about that now. He hoped that her having unexpected company would not complicate matters.

When he met her coming along the pathway from the backyard, he could tell by her face that she was not happy. "Don't go back there," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

Thomas took this to mean that she was annoyed about Pig Eye.

"Get out of here," Mary said. "Now."

That was a bit much. If she was the kind of woman who would react like this over one old man pounding nails, then to hell with her. He would go, all right. But he was not about to do it without taking the few tools he had brought with him. He did not own many to begin with, and he was damned if he was going to leave them to people who already had more than they could figure out a use for. There was money coming, too.

"I'm going back there to see Pig Eye," Thomas said, "and get my stuff."

"No, you're not," she said. Her eyes were a little wild and looked to be pooling with tears. Then she struck at him, swinging her fist sideways awkwardly, the knuckles towards him. This startled Thomas, but he had been struck at before by stronger and more gifted fighters, and he parried the blow easily. He could not fathom why she was being so unreasonable. Something told him there was more to Mary's reaction than just bringing Pig Eye onto the job.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he asked. "I wanted a day off and Pig Eye wanted work." He felt annoyed that he had to explain. "He's okay."

"No, he's not," she said. She began to hit him again, saying, "Go away, go away."

Thomas ran out of patience. "I know about your husband," he said. He kept his voice flat and cool, detached so she'd know she couldn't sway him with her body.

She stood back and stared. "I've seen him," Thomas said. "Out back there."

She turned in the direction of the yard. He heard her say softly, "Dennis." It took a second, but suddenly Thomas realized he had heard no hammering since coming back, and he knew Pig Eye could not be finished. The attitude of her body and the back of her head as she looked towards the yard made it seem as if she was expecting a real person to come along, not a ghost. Thomas pushed past her and ran to the yard.

There was no one there. Pig Eye had done some surprisingly good work while Thomas was gone, but it looked as if he had stopped abruptly. A couple of two-by-fours were lying askew by the pile. A package of three-inch nails had tipped over and spilled on the grass. The chop saw had a length of wood lying through it,

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uncut. And Thomas's hammer was on its side on the last board to be set in place. Next to the hammer, a nail that had been tapped in partway stood waiting for the finishing blows.

Thomas puzzled over where Pig Eye could have gone. Maybe he was inside using the washroom, but Thomas doubted it, knowing from experience that Pig Eye was more likely to relieve himself behind a tree. Then he heard a man's voice coming along the drive. At first he assumed it must be Pig Eye, who always talked so much. But once his ear tuned to it, Thomas realized that it was a voice he had never heard. Instinct told him to make himself scarce and get a fix on what was happening. He walked quickly to the garage and slipped behind it. That's where he found Pig Eye.

Leaning slumped against the garage, Pig Eye looked surprised as always, only this time maybe he really had been. His bulging eyes had glazed over, but hadn't entirely lost their familiar look. His shirt, blue and threadbare, was now also bloodstained. Thomas did not have time to study the situation closely, but he thought that maybe Pig Eye had been stabbed. However it had been done, someone had killed him. Thomas shook his head, wondering what signals he had missed that had let the situation come to this, and he slipped inside the garage.

Through the door, left open a crack, Thomas could hear the voices moving closer. He heard a man saying, "I'm disappointed in you, Mary. He was older and more scraggly than the ones you usually pick. You never did have much taste."

Mary's voice sounded hollow in reply. "I'm sorry. I did my best."

"Yes, well, I'm used to your best being insufficient."

"I'm sorry, Dennis." She sounded miles removed from the confident woman in the bar. Thomas knew life to be that way sometimes, though. He remembered men who had been tough and dependable out in the world, but at home, with the wrong woman, they had turned meek and chewed upon.

As he listened to Dennis belittle her, Thomas felt he ought to do something. However, not knowing if the man was armed made hasty action inadvisable. Thomas waited and thought as the two people outside walked to where Pig Eye lay.

"Let's get him dealt with," Dennis said harshly, and Thomas heard the sounds of Pig Eye's body being shifted and dragged. Suddenly he wondered how many other vagrant bodies were hidden under the lush lawn, lured by work and Mary. It could have been him. He was sure it was meant to be him, if Pig Eye's good fortune hadn't turned sour.

Thomas was thinking this over, wondering if Dennis went away for the purpose of having Mary draw a man in, or if the killing was a bonus tacked on to the end of a successful business trip,

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when he heard a commotion erupt outside. Thomas opened the door wider to capture it.

There was a hard bloody sound that made Thomas queasy, and Mary screamed in a way that even her distant neighbors might be able to hear. Then there was only the sound of Mary sobbing. Thomas left the garage and peered cautiously around the corner, stepping out into the yard when he saw how it was.

Larry was not anywhere near as clumsy with a hammer as Pig Eye had claimed. From the looks of Dennis's head, Larry's blows had found the mark each time. Thomas thought that Larry must have liked the heft of the hammer as much as Thomas did himself.

Larry was standing with the hammer in his fist, breathing hard and looking sadly at Pig Eye. Mary was on her knees about ten feet away, sobbing, but the sound was muffled and Thomas saw that she had one hand balled into a fist and half-buried in her mouth.

"Hey," a voice said.

At first Thomas couldn't figure out who spoke. It was not until the word was repeated that Thomas understood it was Larry.

"Yeah," Thomas said.

"Pig Eye told me to meet him here." Larry spoke slowly and quietly, as if he had to think hard to come up with the words, and then was embarrassed to have made a noise at all. "Said to wait till the job got going good. Said nobody'd mind." He turned from his friend to the woman. "She owe you money?"

"Yeah."

Larry dropped the hammer and walked over to where Dennis lay. He fished around and found a wallet, drawing from it a raft of bills. He handed them to Thomas. "Here." He picked up the hammer again. "Go," he said.

Thomas hesitated, looking at Mary, whose eyes were still fixed on the ground.

"Go," Larry said. He looked back and forth from the partly built deck to the kneeling woman. "I got work to finish."

Thomas looked at the money in his hand. He turned to Mary, who watched him with what might have been hope, fresh tears slipping down her face, sure that he would save her. He understood then that that was what she had done for him. Trying to warn him off and then, when he missed the point, not telling Dennis that the guy he really wanted was hiding in the garage. Now she wanted him to return the favor.

Larry's eyes had an unfocused glaze to them, the hammer red in his fist. "Go on now," he said quietly.

Mary didn't say anything in words, just with her eyes. Thomas looked at the money again, folded it, stuffed it in his pocket. Then he walked to the side of the house and down the driveway towards the street. ●

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THE CAT CAME BACK

by Kathryn Cross

"Why not come along," Catherine coaxed. She ran her hands down that black sheath dress she wore. The one that made her look so hot. "You might have a good time."

"Why not," I agreed, because of the dress, knowing I'd be bored six ways to Sunday.

So, here I am, at Roger what's-his-face's little soiree, surrounded by the geeks, freaks, and arteests that are Catherine's friends and make up this oh-so-stimulating crowd. I take another swig of the useless drink Roger's bartender poured me and slip an unattended bottle of rye into my jacket pocket so it will be close to hand.

A Canadian and a writer of children's stories, the author of this tale prefers to have her work published under a pseudonym. We can tell you, however, that she is the wife of a former member of the Canadian armed forces and has lived in Germany, Holland, and Israel. Her past employment includes stints as a baker, a medical research assistant, and a historical interpreter. Her *EQMM* debut is her second piece of adult fiction; the first appeared in *Country Woman* magazine.

Catherine's on the opposite side of the room, caught in a little cluster of admirers. Everyone calls her Cat. She has the green eyes, sleek body, and graceful moves. Everyone thinks Cat belongs to them. Richard, there, for example, the guy she works for at the art gallery, her esteemed big boss. He's got his arm locked around her waist. And if that plump hand of his strays to her tight little butt, I swear I'll break all five of those professionally manicured fingers.

I catch Cat's eye; she flashes her Cheshire-cat grin. Then she extracts herself from Richard's grasp and weaves through the crowd toward me.

I start whistling beneath my breath. Whistling the tune to "The Cat Came Back." You know, that song about the cat that couldn't stay away. Cat recognizes the tune, all right—she's heard me whistling it before—and her smile widens. When I open my arms, she snuggles with a purr into my embrace. I'm the one, now, who's

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got his hand on her butt, the only one whose hand has the right to be there. Cat's mine. She belongs to me, to nobody else. I clasp her to me so the length of her body presses against mine, her breasts, hips, her thighs—

I look up, and there's Freda glaring at me over the rim of her martini glass. Freda! A twisted sister if there ever was one. Freda curls her mouth into a semblance of a smile and sets down her glass. She stretches her arms and rolls her shoulders like a cat, like Cat. She tosses her head and makes that same backward sweep with her hand Cat does when she straightens her long black hair—except Freda's hair's cropped short and dyed not pink but fuchsia, according to Cat. Then Freda mimics Cat's walk as she approaches us from across the room.

On Freda, Cat's moves are obscene. And if Freda has legs or anything else a man might want under those suits from Moore's she wears, I've never seen any evidence. She's dressed like a freakin' gangster tonight. With Cat draped on my left side, Freda drapes herself on my right, reaches up, and ruffles my hair. Cat smothers a laugh with her hand.

"Well, Mark," Freda asks, "how are you tonight?" As if Freda cares. I take another swig of my drink.

"Just fine, Freda. How about you?"

I reach back, take hold of Freda's jacket sleeve with three fingers—there's no way I'm touching Freda herself—remove her arm from my shoulder, and drop it like a piece of garbage.

"Oh?" Freda says. "Is that the way it is?"

Cat touches her lips to my ear. "You don't want to get on Freda's bad side," she teases. "Freda's got a gun."

Well, S.O.B.! Freda's packing! One of the reasons for the suits she wears, the reason she never takes off the jacket. Freda's packing a piece. Hilarious! No one in their right mind would molest a butch like Freda.

"Freda thinks I should have a gun, too." Cat's all serious now.

The way Freda turns her head and casually looks across the room, a little smirk on her face, I know she's heard what Cat's said. Freda thinks Cat should learn how to protect herself, that she should know how to blow me away. Freda's just jealous because Cat's not hers.

Freda slowly turns back to me, locks her eyes with mine, and wordlessly warns me I'd *better* be careful.

"I'll be right back." Cat pulls away.

"Hey!" I tighten my grip on her. "Where're you going?" She hardly needs to be around Richard and his crowd.

"I have to pee," she insists, giving me a petulant look, fluttering her long eyelashes.

I release her and hope Freda will follow in her path. Freda

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doesn't. Freda probably never has to pee.

"You got a license for that thing, Freda?" I point with my glass at Freda's ribs, left side.

Freda arches one eyebrow, that's it.

I remember, then, that Freda works for some security firm. Guarding empty warehouses, in all probability. Her carrying the gun makes her feel real tough, no doubt.

"Well, Mark . . . It is Mark, isn't it?"

No, Freda, it isn't. Good for you.

"You've been living with Cat for how long now? Three months, is it? Still looking for a job?"

"Got another interview tomorrow, in fact." Absolutely no one annoys me like Freda. "Satisfied?"

"Cat picked you up at the bus depot, right?"

"We met at Starbucks."

"The Starbucks at the bus depot, though, wasn't it? Were you arriving, departing, or just passing through?"

What a struggle it is not to whack her. "This your version of the third degree, is it, Freda?"

"Cat's special, Mark. That's something you should know. She believes in people, brings out the best in them, helps them when she can." Freda studies me a sec. "And I don't want Cat hurt."

Freda's damned jealous, is all.

"You're not good for her, Mark. It's time you moved on, job or no job. Let Cat find someone else."

I don't think so, Freda. Cat loves me. She's mine. There isn't going to be any someone else.

"You know, Mark . . ."

Why don't you damn well shut up!

" . . . I can't figure why Cat's so committed to you. Makes me wonder what you are and what tale you must have spun."

"Want my fingerprints, Freda?" I raise my glass and twist it round in the light. "Want to run a background check?" I can tell from that hungry look in Freda's eyes that's exactly what she wants.

But I've already spotted Cat making her way back through the crowd toward me. And I begin whistling—

That Freda! I swear. My whistling that tune burns her so. No way will Freda take the glass from me in front of Cat. Cat's opinion of Freda would sink so low. I extend my hand to Cat. "Take me home, Cat. Take me into your bed." With my other hand, I tuck my empty glass into the jacket pocket unoccupied by the rye and let Cat lead me from the room. The expression on Freda's face . . . !

The digital clock on Cat's night table, when I open my eyes, shows 11:06 A.M., and the air's thick with the smell of brewed coffee. Cat

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woke me earlier, before she left for work, reminding me of that interview—one of the many interviews Cat's arranged for me—at 10 A.M.

I roll over and stare at the ceiling. Who gives a damn about that interview? I don't even remember what job the interview was for.

Then, lying there like that, don't you know, I get thinking about Cat. Thinking about how great it was in bed with her last night. Last night on into the early morning. And there's no way I can wait until tonight to see her again. Tonight is far too far away. If I turn up at Richard's *très chic* gallery and find a conveniently empty back room . . .

I take a cab. What the heck. I get the driver to drop me two blocks short of the gallery, though, so I can tell Cat I walked over from the interview. An interview that went crackerjack.

I saunter down the street, glancing at shop windows. I pass one of those tarted-up cafes that will spill out onto the sidewalk come summer, and there's Cat sitting inside at one of the tables. But who's the guy she's sitting with? Cat's all smiles, whoever he is. She touches his forearm, then reaches up and strokes his cheek with the back of one finger. He takes that finger and presses it to his lips. Cat's smile widens. Who is this guy, this miserable S.O.B.? His other hand is hidden beneath the table, and I bet he's got it on Cat's knee, Cat with her skirt hiked up, inviting that hand to reach higher. Cat leans across the table, offering her lips—what's she doing?—and the creep kisses *them.*

Then, don't you know, I'm whistling. Clenching my fists, tapping one foot, and whistling harsh and loud. The cat came back . . . *'cause she didn't want to roam* . . . Maybe I'm whistling loud enough to be heard through the glass, because Cat shades her eyes against the sun and looks through the window. She smiles her Cheshire-cat smile—the same one she smiled at that creep a second ago—and she beckons me inside. If I go in, I'll smash that guy's teeth right down his throat. Cat's mine! She belongs to me! I slam the glass with the heel of my hand, set it shivering.

"For Pete's sake, Mark, why are you so upset? I have a right to my friends." That's Cat's explanation when she comes in that night from work. But I'm hard and cold and silent. A freakin' iceberg. I flip through TV channels, thumb on the remote, showing my irritation.

"You've met Craig. Richard displays his work at the gallery. I went out with him for coffee because he's been a bit depressed. Besides," Cat says, throwing her handbag into the armchair, "Craig's gay!" As if that made everything all right. Craig being gay. Craig kissing Cat's lips with his filthy mouth. Cat stalks into the kitchen, bangs pots and rattles dishes as she fixes something to eat.

"Maybe we should cool it for a while, Mark," she says over the

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clatter. "I mean, if you don't like my having friends."

Not what I want to hear. I lay the remote aside and turn to her.

"Listen, Cat, I didn't know it was Craig, all right? I look through the window and you're kissing a guy I don't recognize. Okay, I get angry. What do you expect? I really care for you, and we've got a good thing going. I don't want anyone jeopardizing that." *You belong to me. You're mine.*

"You've never gone out for coffee or lunch with me, Cat." I point this out in an injured voice. "Let's say *we* do lunch sometime." I push myself up from the sofa, go into the kitchen, and encircle Cat with my arms, nuzzle her soft neck. Her body, stiff with anger, relaxes slowly against mine. "Somewhere special for my special lady, all right?" I lay on the charm. Cat rests her head and hand against my chest. "What about tomorrow?"

I feel Cat flinch. "Oh, Mark, I can't. Not tomorrow. Not Thursday." I remember, then: Every Thursday Cat has lunch at Luigi's with Julie. Julie who needs Cat to talk to once a week, as if Julie had anything going for her.

But I keep my mouth shut, and when Cat raises her eyes to me, I attempt an understanding smile. "Okay, Cat. Fine. What about Friday, then?" I brush her forehead with my lips.

"Could we make it a day next week?" She searches my face. "Richard's invited some of his special clients to the gallery on Friday. He needs my help."

"Sure, Cat. Anything you say."

On Thursday, it isn't just Julie who meets Cat for lunch. Freakin' pistol-packing Freda turns up, too. And Cat *knows* how I feel about Freda. I watch the three of them go inside. I wait until they come out again, yacking and laughing, touching and clutching, hugging and kissing. As if *they* had more right to Cat than I do. As if they were more important to Cat than me! Cat's mine!

Freda turns her head in my direction, and I slip back into the shadow of the bank's portico. "Cat," I whisper as I watch them walk away, "we need to talk."

Five days now. It's been five damned days. And I don't know if I can take it much longer. All the freakin' phone calls. If it isn't Richard, it's Freda or Julie. The whole mad tea party asking for Cat. Richard telephoned first, bright and early Monday morning. "Is Cat there?"

"No, she's not." I hadn't even had a coffee, for Christ's sake. "I was about to call you. She's in Seattle."

"She's where? Seattle! What's she doing in Seattle?"

"If you'll shut up, Richard, I'll tell you, okay?" I heard Richard bluster and fume, imagined him shaking with fury. Looks damned good on ya, Richard.

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"She's got this friend in Seattle who's really sick or something. Just like Cat, she had to go. Never said goodbye to me or anything." I let the irritation seep into my voice. "She telephoned last night from out West and asked me to contact you."

"When did she leave?"

"Saturday or Sunday, I guess. I was out of town, chasing a job."

"Can I reach her?"

Jeez, Richard, why can't you bloody well back off. "The friend's dying, Richard, and Cat's staying at the hospital. I don't have any idea which hospital. At a time like this, she doesn't want to be bothered, anyway." I hung up the phone on the insensitive bastard.

Julie phoned next. "We always have lunch together on Thursdays," she whined, wanting her piece of Cat. "She didn't tell me—"

"The friend's dying, Julie! How could she know?" Now I'm genuinely pissed off at these so-called supportive friends of Cat.

"Have you any idea when she'll be back?"

"No!" I dropped the phone on her ear, too.

I should stay. I have to stay. A few more days at least. With Cat out of sight, I need to remain in full view. Otherwise, what kinds of conclusions are those *good* friends of Cat going to jump to? Stay and make sure they've got the story on Cat straight. Then head West myself. I wonder what Cat's friends will make of that? Might screw them up big time.

But those friends of Cat won't let up. And they're driving me crazy!

That bitch Freda's the worst. She calls every damned day. "Is Cat back yet?" "Have you heard from Cat?" I think of telling Freda the friend died and Cat's staying for the funeral, to get her off my back. Except Freda would probably ask for the name of the funeral home so she could send a sympathy card. "And by the way, Mark," she said this morning, "I haven't heard you whistling lately. You know, 'The Cat Came Back.' Got some doubt in your mind there, Mark, about Cat returning?" That freakin' Freda, noticing every little thing.

"Cat's using the sick friend as an excuse, that's it, isn't it, Mark? She's had enough of you and your shadowing her all the time—I've seen you following her. She's not coming back until you're out of her life, isn't that right?"

I don't damn well care for the sarcasm in Freda's voice.

"Now wouldn't that make you happy. You've always set Cat against me. You've sunk your poisonous barbs in every chance you got." I'm so pissed at Freda. Righteous indignation, isn't that what it's called? I give her a full blast of that. "It might be she needs a break from *you* and the rest of that mob pestering her all the time. That ever cross your mind?" Chew on that one, Freda.

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This time it was Freda who slammed down the phone on me.

Five days of this is long enough.

I spend the rest of the day getting my gear together, money from a couple of ATMs, buying tickets from here to there. As long as I'm away from the phone, away from Cat's friends, it's not so bad. I drop my packed duffel bag on the bedroom floor of Cat's apartment and roll, fully-clothed, into Cat's soft bed. First thing tomorrow, I'm out of here.

Doesn't the damn phone ring again! If it's Freda, to hell with her. But the number on the display screen isn't one I recognize. The phone keeps ringing. I think about pulling the jack from the wall, but what if it's another one of Cat's friends needing to be told.

I snatch up the receiver. "This better be important. I was in the shower."

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry," a male voice apologizes. Terrific! Just who I'd love to chat with. That freakin' Craig who paints those crappy abstracts that Richard flogs as art. "I was wondering if I could speak to Cat."

"Cat's not here! She's in Seattle! Richard must've told you!"

"Well . . . ah . . . it's . . ."

My hand tightens on the receiver the way I'd like to tighten it around Craig's eggshell head. *Spit it out, you jerk.*

"If Cat was away, she's back. She wanted to set up an appointment to look at my latest paintings."

What's he talking about? The receiver emits a crack under the strain of my grip.

"I assumed she went home, you know, after work. That she was at the apartment with . . . you."

It's like a blade between my ribs, collapsing my lungs. I drop to the bed.

What's he babbling about?

"Hello? Are you there?"

"Yeah," I snarl. I'm talking with a freakin' maniac.

"Is everything okay between you and Cat? Freda's been saying—"

"So Cat called. She called you. Where was she calling from, if she called you?"

"I assumed she called from the gallery."

"The gallery. She was at the gallery. With Richard?"

"I guess."

"Richard saw her?"

"I would think so."

"You're crazy!" I yank out the damn phone this time and smash it against the wall. Cat can't be there! Not at the gallery. She's not here, and she's not there! I tear the covers from Cat's bed and fling

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them onto the floor, sweep the bedroom lamp from the night table, break the framed picture of Cat over my knee.

I realize, then, what I'm doing, and I laugh. I laugh and laugh. Cat's mine. Always has been, ever will be. I don't know what Craig's little game is, what he's up to, maybe it's his coke-addled brain getting it wrong again.

I'll stop by the gallery tomorrow and talk to Richard. That's all. I'll ask him if *he's* heard from Cat. Then I'll know what it is with Craig.

I push the stained-glass door of the gallery open. I stowed my bag at the bus depot already, then sauntered the three blocks over. I take my time, play it cool. Why not?

Richard hears the buzzer and half turns from the client he's showing addle-brained Craig's grotesque work to, and his face turns purple. He puffs up like a toad, narrows his eyes, then strides toward me. "What are you doing here?"

I take my hands from my pockets and spread them in mock surrender. "I was wondering if you'd heard from Cat."

"She's not here."

"Yeah, I know. She's in Seattle—"

"No, I mean she isn't here *now.* And I think it would be a good idea if you left, too." He grabs my arm and drags me toward the door.

"You *little*—!" I wrench free of his grasp, the hot taste of bile in my throat. "What are you talking about!"

"Cat doesn't want to see you anymore. She's had enough of you. Freda and I think it best if you remove yourself and your things from her apartment. It's her apartment, after all. Get out of her life, Mark, get out of town. It's time."

He's crazy! They're all crazy. Cat belongs to me. She's mine.

Richard grabs my arm with the strength of the maniac he's become and wrestles me out the door.

"If she's not here," I scream at him, "then where is she?"

"If you don't know, I'll be damned if I'll tell you." But his eyes dart nervously down the block, and a look of anguish twists his face. What the—?

Damn! It's Thursday. I tear out of Richard's grasp, ignore Richard's shout. Every Thursday it was lunch at Luigi's with Julie. I don't know what their game is, but they're all in it together. Richard, Freda, Craig, Julie. And Julie is their weakest link.

By the time I race over, Julie's already on the sidewalk outside Luigi's, buttoning the last button on her coat. Julie and all her petty problems she dumps on Cat once a week.

She looks up, sees me, and takes a step back. Julie, all-time loser and little wimp.

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"Oh! Hi, Mark. You just missed Cat."

Her words strike me like a blow.

"What do you mean?" What do you mean, you twit?

"You know her friend in Seattle? The one who was in the car accident? Like, it was a miracle. No one thought she would make it, then, a day ago, she came out of the coma, and now she's coming along fine."

I squeeze my eyes closed, clamp my jaws to keep from screaming. What's Julie talking about?

Julie cranes her neck and looks across the street, the four lanes of afternoon traffic. "There she is," she says brightly, waving a hand.

"There who is?" I ask through gritted teeth.

"Why, Cat, of course." She waves again, wildly. "Cat! Cat?" she cries above the street noise. "Mark's looking for you."

The woman half in, half out of the passenger side of the red Toyota pauses. Cat? She lifts her head, the way Cat does, she pushes her hair back from her face with that familiar sweep of her hand. Cat's long black hair, Cat's hand, Cat's gorgeous legs. She looks for a moment in our direction, dark glasses shading her eyes, then slips into the car, closes the door. The car drives off.

How can that be Cat? Cat's mine.

"Gosh, Mark, are you all right? Have you and Cat had a falling out? I get so busy telling Cat my problems I forget to ask about hers."

I turn on Julie, reach for her throat, ready to throttle the living daylights out of her because of her lies. Julie takes more than one step back this time.

"It's not my fault, Mark! I didn't do anything."

I let my hands fall. Everyone on the street is watching, everyone in the restaurant has their eyes glued to the action outside the window.

"Maybe you should go back to the apartment, Mark. You look awful. Maybe Cat will phone you and explain. It's probably just a misunderstanding, and the two of you will get back together again."

"Yeah, right!" I bellow at Julie. "As if you knew anything!"

I need a drink. I need to get damn drunk! It's like I'm inside a tornado, being spun round and round.

When I reach Cat's apartment, after hitting a few bars, I'm not near as drunk as I'd like to be. I slide Cat's key into the lock. And the key turns so easily, I know the lock's already been released.

I push the door open, step into the dark entrance, and smell Cat. Her scent. Not a perfume she wore, her scent. The lamp in the living room is lit. The first thing I see is her legs. Her long legs as she crosses them seductively, the hem of her black dress hiked up, inviting my hand, any hand that wants, to touch a knee, stroke a thigh. Her hand, long fingernails painted that plum color, a hand that caressed, that flirted, that touched the arm, the face, of any and everyone, a hand that beckoned, enticed. Hand to her dark

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hair, her eyes still in shadow, and there's her mouth. Lush, ripe lips always offered for a kiss, a kiss from Richard, from Craig, from freakin' Freda, anyone who came along. A blown kiss to that panhandling S.O.B. in the subway. Cat's soon-to-be someone else, my replacement, couldn't I tell. Except I put a stop to that.

Those lush lips purse . . . then whistle. Whistle the tune to "The Cat Came Back."

"You can't be Cat." In a way I'm surprised that I say this out loud. Who do I think I'm talking to? "Cat's dead. I killed her. I scattered her body in so many places, no one will ever have a piece of her again. She's mine. She belonged to me."

For a moment, there is only silence, a deep, still silence that a voice finally breaks.

"You always whistled that tune, Mark. So full of yourself, so certain Cat would always come back to you. It drove me crazy. But you didn't whistle it after you said that Cat was in Seattle. You didn't, and I told you so. Remember?"

I burst out laughing. It's freakin' Freda got up in disguise.

Freda slips the black wig from her head, dangles it in her hand at her knee, and leans forward until her eyes gleam in the light.

"I don't think you know all the lyrics to that song, Mark. The cat keeps coming back, but in the last stanza as a ghost. In a way, I'm Cat's ghost."

"Whatever you say, Freda."

Then I notice the glint of the little revolver Freda has pointed at me from the cradle of her lap. Good old Freda.

I throw up my hands. "You got me, Freda. What now? You going to call the cops?"

Freda leans back in the chair, concealing her eyes in shadow again.

"My word against yours, Freda. And there ain't no corpse. Not so you can find one, anyway." It occurs to me, then, that Freda's recording.

"Taping this, are you, Freda? Evidence? Then let me explain that I knew all along you guys were setting me up. You, Richard, Craig, and little Julie. So I turned the hoax back on you, I played the big bad killer you expected me to be. Ha, effin' ha. Do you hear that, all you cops reviewing this tape? Big practical joke! As far as I know, Cat's still in Seattle." I shrug my shoulders—hands still in the air—at Freda.

The foot of her crossed leg begins to bounce. Who knew Freda had such great legs? She doesn't look half bad when she's dolled up.

"Evidence? Perhaps proof is a better word."

"Sorry, Freda, I don't think any law-enforcement agency will accept this as proof of anything."

"The thing is, Mark, we—me and the rest of Cat's friends—don't have much confidence in the justice system dispensing justice. We

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agreed that if I proved you killed Cat—and I think your confession is good enough—I should go ahead."

"Go ahead with what?" If freakin' Freda thinks she's scaring me . . .

"We all loved Cat, you know. Really did love her." She leans forward again. Her eyes have a set look that says whatever she's planned, in her mind, it's already over. I feel a sudden chill.

"You're finished yourself, Freda, if you kill me with your own gun. Evidence, after all."

"The thing is, Mark, this isn't mine." I notice, then, that Freda's wearing a surgical glove on the hand holding the gun. "It's Cat's."

I snort. "Cat would never own a gun."

Freda smiles. "Don't I know." She turns the gun slightly, looks at it almost reverently. "I think she agreed to buy it only to please me. She was never convinced it was such a dangerous world. I selected a model of handgun suitable for her, helped with the paperwork, got the gun licensed in her name. But Cat's heart wasn't in it." Freda releases a breath.

"I went with her when she took possession of the gun. She didn't want to take it to her apartment—maybe you were there—but to mine.

"When we reached my apartment, I wanted *her* to take the gun out of its case, her to hold it, get accustomed to it, attached. She handled it for less than a minute—she did try. But then she returned the gun to the case, secured the lid, and pushed the case across the table to me. 'I'm sorry, Freda. I can't. Could you return it for me, please?' "

Freda raises her eyes from the gun, and they are as deep and dark as wells. As deep and dark as the end of the gun's barrel that she also raises and centers on my forehead. "Cat's gun, Cat's prints. Maybe even Cat who entered the apartment building, if there was anyone to see. Cat who runs out. As for me, I'm at the gallery, attending a showing of Craig's most recent works, as Richard, Julie, and all Cat's friends will testify. So you see, Mark, in a way, Cat came back." ●

(continued from p. 136) from this year and last (8/02, 2/03, 4/03, and 6/03), is from the brush of muralist and illustrator Owen Smith. An acknowledged devotee of pulp art, he also takes inspiration from the WPA artists of the '30s and from Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. One can see these influences in the aggressive way his version of pulp bursts from the page.

A more realistic interpreter of the pulp period, Chuck Pyle, creator of our 5/03 and 9-10/02 covers, uses somber shades (browns and grays) to evoke an urban mood reminiscent of film noir. Si Huynh, 5/02's cover artist, takes a different tack entirely, employing angular shapes to give a cold, abstract quality to the stock figures of the genre.

Despite many variations of style, all of the classic and modern practitioners of this vivid art form are adept at conveying a sense of the thrill awaiting readers beneath the covers they devise. How appropriate that makes their work for a magazine such as ours!

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Art by Laurie Harden

The Lost Boy

by Robert Barnard

The young man in jeans and chunky pullover walked out of the sportswear shop into the broad upper walk of the shopping precinct, his little boy riding high on his shoulders.

"Where to now, Captain?" he asked. "What's the menu: Coke, ice cream, or lemonade?"

The child's eyes sparkled, but he thought long and seriously and when at last he said, "Lemonade, Daddy," the man wondered whether he said it because it was the last option mentioned. Often his apparent pondering was really the sign of his general thoughtfulness.

"Okay, well, we'll go to the ice-cream stall downstairs, shall we? They have drinks as well there, so you can make up your mind finally when you get there."

"Yes!" said the little boy enthusiastically.

They made an attractive sight as they took the escalator down to the lower floor of the shopping precinct, the little boy glorying in his wondrous elevation above really grown-up people, crowing down on them and drawing their attention. The man was about

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twenty-five, casual altogether, but his jeans were clean and above the neck of the pullover could be seen the bright check of his shirt. The face would not have attracted a second look, but when it did, the passerby would have noted light brown hair cut short around a long, thoughtful face.

"Here we are, Captain," he said as they arrived at the ice-cream stall on the ground level. "Now, take a good look and tell me what it is you'd like."

"What a lovely little boy," said a middle-aged woman, joining the queue behind them.

"Malcolm?" responded the man softly, his hand ruffling the hair of the boy, now on the ground and staring through the side glass of the stall. "He's a cracker. But we don't tell him."

Robert Barnard is the winner of the 2003 Crime Writers Association Cartier Diamond Dagger Award for lifetime achievement. This highest honor in British crime writing goes to an author who has already won the American Nero Wolfe, Anthony, Agatha, and Macavity Awards, and has received eight nominations for the Edgar. We present a Barnard novella this time. The author's latest novel is *The Mistress of Alderley* (Scribner; 4/03). ✝

They looked at him. He was oblivious to their conversation, single-mindedly surveying the range of desirables on offer.

"Take your time, Captain," the man said.

"He's got a good father, that's for sure," said the woman, half in love with the man's youth and healthy look. "These days men pretend they're shouldering half the burden, but really they leave most of it to the mother as they always did."

"He's everything to me," said the young man simply. "He's what makes life worth living. We'll be phoning his mother in a while, to tell her we're both all right."

"Oh—don't you come from here?"

"No, we're not from these parts."

"I want the red one," said the little boy, pointing to a bright pink bowl of ice cream.

"The red one, right. I think that's cherry, not strawberry."

"Sherry. I want the sherry one."

So the cherry one it was. The man paid for a double scoop of ice cream, refused one for himself, and when he'd paid over the money he nodded to the woman and led the boy by the left hand out of the St. James's Mall and into early spring sunlight. The boy walked confidently, his hand in the man's, while the other one held the cornet, which he was licking enthusiastically.

"Don't they make a lovely picture?" said the middle-aged woman

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wistfully to the girl behind the counter of the stall. The girl looked as if she had seen enough children in her job to last her a lifetime.

"Now then, Captain," said the man, his little boy's hand still warmly in his as they waited on the pavement, then crossed the Headrow and started down towards Boar Lane. "We'll go to the station and phone your mother to tell her we're all right, and then we'll go to the car and find a bed for the night."

Malcolm nodded wisely, and went on licking his ice cream with intense concentration. It lasted him most of the way to Boar Lane, and when it was done he needed his fingers and his chin wiped with a handkerchief.

"Want to ride on my shoulders again?"

"Yes!" It was said with the intensity Malcolm reserved for everything he felt most deeply or enthusiastically about. The man took him under the armpits and swung him up. They crossed Boar Lane towards the Yates Wine Bar, then took the side road to the station.

"Now then, Malcolm," the man said, "I think the telephones are through there near the ticket office."

The boy was taking in the large square concourse and the train departure board, his eyes wide. After a second he nodded. They went through to the booking hall, the man bending his knees to get through the door, the child on his shoulders crowing triumphantly. They found a telephone, and the man brought Malcolm down from his point of vantage to sit in the crook of his arm beside the telephone.

"Now, we put some money in. . . . That's it. Let's see: 01325. Then 274658. . . . Here we are. It's ringing. Now then, Captain: your call to Mummy."

The phone had been picked up at the other end.

"274658." The voice sounded strained.

"Mummy!"

"Malcolm! Where are you? What—?"

But already the man's strong forefinger had come down on the telephone's cradle.

"There we are, Captain. Mustn't take up too much of Mummy's time."

"I'm getting desperate," said Selena Randall.

Her solicitor, Derek Mitcham, looked at her hands, tugging and tearing at a tiny handkerchief, and could only agree. He had found, though, with desperate clients, that the best thing to do was to keep the tone low and level.

"Everyone's doing everything they can," he said.

The woman's voice rose dangerously.

"Are they? *Are* they? It doesn't look like that to me, I can tell

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you. The police, for example. What are they doing, actually *doing?* I can't see that they're doing anything."

"You can be quite sure that police forces all over the country have a description of your husband, and of Malcolm. They'll all be on the lookout for them."

In this case the measured tone did not seem to be working.

"But what about publicity? If there was a hue and cry, a proper campaign with publicity in the media, everyone in the country would be looking for them. Carol Parker is everywhere, appealing to people who see her little boy and his father—in all the tabloids, and on daytime television, too."

Mr. Mitcham sighed. He knew Mrs. Randall was not avid for publicity, only anxious to do everything needed to get her son back. But she must give people who knew her less well a very poor impression, and though he had tried to get the message across to her, this still came up at every meeting they had. He tried again.

"Mrs. Parker's husband is German, and he has a history of mental instability. The police are afraid he may take the little boy out of the country, or even harm him wittingly or unwittingly. You must see that your husband is a quite different matter. Children are taken quite frequently by the parent who does not have custody. Usually there is no question of their being in any danger."

He spoke quietly and distinctly, and now it seemed to work. Selena nodded, taking in, at least for the moment, his argument.

"Oh, I know Dick wouldn't harm Malcolm. He loves him to bits. . . . But the fact that he's English doesn't mean he won't take him out of the country."

"You can be sure the police at ports and airports will be especially on the alert."

"These days you can drive through the channel tunnel and no one gives you a second glance."

"That's not true, Mrs. Randall."

She looked down at the ruin of her handkerchief.

"I don't think anybody cares. They just think 'the little boy is bound to be all right,' and don't give it another thought."

"Well, that is something that must be a comfort for you."

"But what about me? I had custody of him, and I haven't seen him for nearly ten weeks." Her eyes filled with tears and she began dabbing them with the ragged bits of hankie. "Do you know what I fear? I *am* afraid he'll forget me, as a young child like Malcolm is bound to do quite soon. But most of all, I'm afraid I'll forget him. What he sounds like, how he laughs, what it feels like to touch him, have him in my arms." She looked up at Mr. Mitcham, wild-eyed. "I'm afraid if I get him back he'll be a stranger."

"I'm sure you won't forget a thing about him. No mother would."

"Don't be so bloody sentimental! How would you know? . . .

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sorry." She resumed tugging at the handkerchief. "You said everyone would be on the lookout for Dick and Malcolm, but what is there to be on the lookout *for?* Dick is nice-enough-looking, but there's nothing to distinguish him from thousands of other quite nice-looking young men. Hair colour—that's about the only thing to mark him off: light brown, so that rules out people with black or blond hair. Not much, is it? There's still less with Malcolm."

"They have a photograph."

"I wish it was a better photograph. . . ." She returned obsessively to her theme. "Dick has quite an arrogant look sometimes. Raises his chin and looks out at the world as if he thinks he's a lot better than other people. I don't suppose? . . . No. It's just impression, isn't it, not fact. It's fact you need. Little Anton Parker has a mole on his hip. Malcolm has nothing. She can just pull his pants down and check, whereas I'll have nothing, if I ever see him again. Can you believe it? *Nothing* to distinguish him from thousands and thousands of other boys of his age. . . . Sometimes I think it's hopeless. Sometimes I think I might just as well give up."

"I know you're not serious about that, Mrs. Randall."

"No. . . . It's just a mood. I'll never give up."

"Nor should you."

"I sometimes wonder whether Dick won't come back of his own accord and we can all three be together like we used to be."

"I don't think you should bank on that. But there is going to come a crunch point, and it might come soon. He can't go on running forever. Where did he ring you from?"

"From Leeds. I can't believe Dick would be so cruel. Just one word. . . ."

"The last sighting we had of them that was pretty firm was North Wales. Eventually he's going to run out of money."

There was a pause. Then Mr. Mitcham saw Selena Randall's shoulders stiffen as she made a decision.

"I don't think he will."

"Why not? What do you mean?" He saw the shoulders slacken slightly and he said urgently: "Tell me."

Then it all came out. When she had told her tale, he asked her, already knowing the answer, "Have you told the police this?"

"No. I thought it might get Dick into trouble."

This time Mr. Mitcham's sigh was audible. Sometimes he despaired of fathoming the mysteries of people's hearts.

At the cash desk of The Merry Cook, Dick Randall asked if they had a room vacant. The chain of roadside eateries had at some of their establishments a few overnight rooms—inexpensive, simple, anonymous. It was their anonymity that appealed, because it seemed to spread to the rooms' users. He had a name thought up

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if he had been asked for one: Tony Wilmslow. He enjoyed thinking up names while he was driving, and sometimes thought he could people a whole novel with the characters he'd invented—though of course it would be an all-male novel, and the idea of that didn't appeal to him. The girl behind the counter nodded, rang up £32.50 on the till, and handed over a key when he paid in cash. Dick's credit card had been unused since he had snatched Malcolm from the front garden of the house he had once shared with his wife.

"Number three," said the girl, then turned her eyes to the next customer in the line, totting up the price of the plates and polystyrene cup on her tray.

I'm not even thought worthy of a second glance, thought Dick wryly, but with an underlying satisfaction. He went out to the car where Malcolm was still strapped in and parked it outside number three.

"Home for the night," he said. "Come along, Captain."

They'd eaten at midday, so they had no use of the cheap and cheerful meals at The Merry Cook. Dick took from the backseat a slice of cold pizza in a plastic bag—something left over from Malcolm's lunch—and a carton of milk. For himself he had bought a sandwich. He never ate much when he had something on, though he was one of those people who burned up calories and never was other than slim. Still, eating made him *feel* bulkier.

They ate companionably on the bed, then played the cat's cradle game Dick had himself always loved when a child, and had taught his son. Malcolm could undress himself for bed, and loved to do it, his face always rapt with concentration. Dick sat him on the lavatory, then chose one of the five or six stories Malcolm always insisted on when he was being read to sleep.

"Remember," Dick said, as he always did, "if you wake in the night and I'm not here, I won't be far away, and I'll soon be back. Just turn over and go to sleep again."

Malcolm nodded, and lay there waiting for *Postman Pat.* Dick wished he could wean him on to a wider choice of stories, but thought that familiarity must be settling to a child's mind at a time when so much of what he was experiencing was unfamiliar. After a page or so, the little head nodded. Dick turned off the light, then lay on the bed beside him, fully clothed.

Dick had marked out the bungalow as they'd driven through the March darkness on the approaches to The Merry Cook. Old, substantial, without alarm, and with token lights obviously switched on by a neighbour. At shortly before midnight, Malcolm sleeping soundly, Dick got carefully off the bed, took the gloves and torch from the little bedside table where he'd left them, collected his old canvas bag from the spindly armchair, and then slipped out of the motel room.

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There was no need to take the car. Dick was only interested in portable property. He had a nose for houses inhabited by the sort of people who would have accumulated it. He had a wonderful sense, too, of street geography, acquired during his teenage years: He always knew the best approach to a place, and still better the whole range of possible escape routes. There was no point in subtlety in the approach to number 41 Sheepscar Road, but as he padded along he renewed in the darkness the possible ways of making a quick exit from the area. The lights in the bungalow had been switched off by the obliging neighbour. All the adjacent house lights were off. Once inside the garden he waited in the darkness at the side of the house to make sure he had not been heard or observed. When no lights went on or sounds were heard, he let himself in through the front door with the ease of practice. Where you could use a credit card to do it you knew you were dealing with very unworldly owners.

Which everything in the house pointed to. The jewel box was by the dressing-room table in the main bedroom, and yielded modest to good pickings. The inevitable stash of notes under the mattress amounted, his experienced grasp of the bundle told him, to something in the region of two hundred pounds. The sideboard drawer revealed silver cutlery of good quality and an antique candle-snuffer which he suspected was something special. All went into the overnight bag after a torchlight inspection, as did an Art Deco vase in the centre of the dining table. He was out of the house in ten minutes. The rooms he left were to all intents and purposes so similar to their state when he came in that the neighbour would probably not notice that there had been an intruder.

He was back in the little bedroom with Malcolm half an hour after he had left him. As he undressed, the boy stirred in his sleep. Dick got in beside him and cuddled him close. Their future seemed assured for the next week or so.

Inspector Purley looked at Selena Randall with a mixture of sympathy and exasperation. He had always had the feeling that she was holding out on him, either deliberately or unconsciously. In fact, he'd pressed her on this in previous talks they'd had, and she had denied it, but in a way that never quite did away with his suspicion. Now it was going to come out.

"You say there's something about your husband that you've been keeping from us?" he said.

He flustered her further.

"Well, not keeping from you. Just not telling you because I didn't think it was relevant. And I didn't want to hurt Dick, because I always thought—or hoped, anyway—that one day he'd come back

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and everything would be as it used to be. That's what I really wanted. . . . You see, this could really harm him. . . ."

"Yes. Go on."

"He . . . When I met him, six years ago, he was an accomplished thief. A house burglar."

Inspector Purley bit back any annoyance.

"But he's got no record. We checked."

"No. I said he was very accomplished. He was never caught. . . . You do see why I didn't tell you, don't you? I mean, if he was to be caught with Malcolm, it wouldn't be just the abduction, would it?"

She looked at him, tearfully appealing. Inspector Purley sighed. The story had changed in seconds from not thinking it relevant to not wanting to land her husband with an even longer prison sentence than he'd get anyway.

"Do you know, Mrs. Randall, I think it's time you made up your mind."

"I don't understand you."

"You really have to sort out your priorities. Is your first priority getting your little boy back?"

"*Yes.* Of course it is."

"Then you've got to tell us everything that might be relevant to finding him and your husband. Everything."

"Yes. . . . It's just that I've never felt bitter towards Dick. I loved him when I married him, and I still love him. I can't believe he'd be so cruel as to let me hear Malcolm's voice on the phone and then cut us off after only a single word. It's like he's become another person."

Inspector Purley thought that might be because he was afraid Malcolm would let slip something that could be of use to the police, but he was not in the business of trying to make her think more kindly of her husband. That was the whole problem.

"That's really cruel," he agreed. "Now, about these burglaries: What kind of detail can you give me about them? Your husband isn't on our computer, but the burglaries will be."

She looked at him wide-eyed.

"I don't know any details. I only know he was doing them. That's how he dressed so well, ran a car, did the clubs, and ate at good restaurants. When I found out, of course, I made him stop. That was a condition of our getting engaged. My father got him a job with a business associate. For a time he did very well. He learned quickly, and Dick always had charm. People warmed to him, looked on him as a friend. He was under-manager of the Garrick Hotel in Darlington when the group merged with a larger one, and there were redundancies. . . . That was when things started to go wrong."

"Did he go back to his old ways?"

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"No! But he hated being so hard up, and when I got a job he hated being dependent on me."

Inspector Purley considered the matter.

"So how long ago were these burglaries he did?"

"About five years ago—that's when he stopped. But he'd been doing them for years, since he left school."

"And he's how old now?"

"Twenty-six."

"What can you tell us about the burglaries? Surely there must be something about them that sticks in your mind, or one particular job he told you about that stood out?"

"No, there's not. I never knew anything about them. I refused to listen."

She was pulling back, Inspector Purley thought. She needed to be given a further push to remind her what was at stake.

"He must have been good," he said admiringly, "never to have been caught. Didn't he ever boast? Say what it was that made him so good?"

"Well . . ." She was reluctant, but was being borne along by the tide. "He always said the secret wasn't the technical things, how to break and enter—though he was good at that, too. He said that what mattered was a good eye."

The inspector digested this.

"For what? For stuff that would fetch a tidy sum? Or for an easy target, a likely victim?"

"The last. He always said the best target was a retired couple or a widowed person, someone who had built up a bit of property and was now pottering along." She was putting it more politely than Richard usually had, but suddenly she put aside her protectiveness again. " 'Someone who had done quite nicely for himself and was now coasting towards his dotage'—that's how he described it once. He only said things like that when he was trying to get my goat."

"I see," commented the inspector drily. "He has a nice way with words, your husband. Or a nasty one."

But privately he was pleased to have had contact with the man through his own words. They sounded very adolescent, and he wondered how much of the daredevil boy was in the man still. But most of all he hoped that her willingness to quote her husband's words and show him in an unfavourable light meant that Selena Randall had turned a corner.

"Dick would never hurt Malcolm," said Selena, dashing his hopes. "I've got to believe that. He loves him more than anyone in the world. That's why I don't want to hurt him."

Inspector Purley reserved judgment. He hoped for her sake and the little boy's that what she said about her husband was true.

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Dick Randall came out of the little back-street jeweller's with a spring in his step. The man had not hidden his appreciation of the brooch's value, had commented on the workmanship and the quality of the stones, and had offered Dick a very fair price. He was an honest man, and it had been a pleasure to do business with such a person.

Malcolm was still strapped into his seat in the little car park round the corner. It always gave Dick a lift of the heart to see him again. He was solemnly watching a Dalmatian dog in the next car, which was in its turn watching a lazy car-park cat. It struck Dick how lucky he was that Malcolm was the sort of child who could be left on his own for fifteen or twenty minutes, without danger of panic fits or grizzling. He was solemn, watchful, and even, in his childish way, self-confident. Perhaps it was because he had had to be.

"Here I am, Captain," he said, opening his car door and sliding himself into the driver's seat. "A nice little bit of business, very satisfactorily concluded."

He was talking to himself rather than the child, but as usual Malcolm took him up.

"What's bizniz?"

"Business?" he said, starting the car and thinking how he could explain business to a three-year-old. "Well, let's see. Business can be something you've got that someone wants and is willing to pay for. Or it may be some skill or ability that you have that the other man hasn't got, and he'll pay you to use that skill for him. Or it may be a sort of swap: Do this for me, and I'll do that for you."

He'd tried hard to make it simple, but he knew he was still talking as much to himself as to the child. He often did this, having no one but a child to talk to. *Malcolm is going to grow up too quickly,* he thought, *unless I can settle him down somewhere where he can make friends and lead a normal child's life.*

"So did you have something that the man you went to see wanted?" Malcolm asked after digesting his words.

"That's right, I did. And it means we can eat for a fortnight," said Dick.

"What would we do if we didn't have the money to buy food?"

"Oh, but we always will. That I can promise you, Malcolm. It's what daddies are for—getting money so that you can have food and clothes and a bed for the night."

After a moment Malcolm nodded, seemingly satisfied, and then went off into a light doze. Dick drove on southwards, at a moderate speed.

They stopped for lunch in Grantham. Dick tried to give the little boy a balanced diet, but today, buoyed by the notes bursting the

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seams of his wallet, he said: "Today you can have just anything you want, Captain."

They found a side-street cafe that looked cosy. Malcolm chose chicken nuggets and chips, and Dick had the day's special: roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. The cafe's owner cooed over Malcolm, but knew better than to ask where his Mummy was: All too often you got a sad tale of marriage breakup. Men alone with children these days usually meant they were using quality time graciously allowed them by the Child Support Agency. Malcolm had a slice of chocolate gâteau for afters, and Dick cleaned him up in the lavatories before going up to the counter, buying some sandwiches and buns for their evening meal, and settling up for everything. When they emerged into the bright afternoon sunlight he felt like a million dollars.

The little jeweller's shop was nearly opposite the cafe.

"Do you know, Malcolm, I feel it's my lucky day," said Dick.

He led the child by the hand the hundred or so yards down the street to where his car was parked. He opened the boot and began to rummage in the canvas bag. Malcolm, standing beside him on the pavement, regarded him wide-eyed: The bag, for him, was beginning to assume the mystic standing of a cornucopia, source of endless goodies.

"Have you got something the man will want?" he asked.

"I think so," said Dick, finally selecting a rather showy diamond ring. "Now, I'll only be five minutes or so, Captain, and then we can be on our way. So you can just sit in your car seat and watch the world go by."

He strapped him in and walked whistling back down the street, the ring wrapped in tissue paper in his trouser pocket. The door of the jeweller's shop opened with an old-fashioned ring.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

The words were old-fashioned and welcoming, the face less so. There was a suspicion of midnight shadow over the jowls, the eyes were calculating, the mouth mean. Dick nearly turned round there and then, but he had no desire to draw attention to himself needlessly. There seemed to be no alternative but to plunge in.

"I wondered whether you'd be interested in this."

He drew from his pocket the little package and unwrapped it. The central diamond sparkled dangerously, and the rubies of the surround smouldered. The ring was already beginning to seem ill-omened in his eyes. The man behind the counter took it noncommittally.

"Hmm. A rather assertive piece. Not really Grantham. However, I do have one customer who might . . . and there's a dealer I do business with who sometimes takes this sort of thing. . . ." The tone seemed to Dick professionally disparaging. "I'll just take it

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into the back, sir, with your permission, and get a better look at the stones."

Dick nodded. The man disappeared through the glass door behind the counter and Dick saw him go behind a little booth in the back room, where he imagined a microscope was set up. He waited, glancing nonchalantly at the rings and pendants on the trays under the counter, and the jewelled clocks and ornaments on the glassed-in shelves behind it.

Suddenly the jeweller's head appeared above the walls of the booth. Dick forced himself to seem to be looking at something else. The man had a telephone at his ear, and he was looking at Dick. When his head disappeared down into the booth again, Dick turned and wrenched open the door.

The shop bell rang.

He began running. In seconds, he was wrenching open the driver's door, had his key in the ignition, and was scorching off down the street. In his mirror he could see the jeweller in the door of his shop. This was probably the most exciting thing to happen in his mean little life for years, Dick thought. *Not too fast. Don't draw attention. Get onto the motorway and then open up.*

"Didn't he want what you had for him?" Malcolm asked.

"Oh, he wanted it," said Dick. "I'm driving fast because I'm excited and pleased."

That night they spent one of their rare nights in the car. Dick had put about a hundred and fifty miles between him and the Grantham police, then had gone off the motorway and cruised around some little Southern English towns and villages. Somehow he felt all shaken up, and he blamed himself bitterly. He would never indulge in childish superstition again. My lucky day, my foot! Like some toothless old granny reading her horoscope! He hadn't had a worse one since the day he snatched Malcolm. He just couldn't face the lies and the performance he always put on at bed-and-breakfast places, nor going back onto the motorway to find a Merry Cook with rooms attached. There was also the matter of organising new number-plates for the car. He didn't think the man could have seen his—themselves acquired from an abandoned car in Gateshead—but he wasn't taking any risks.

"Do you mind, Captain?" he asked Malcolm. "I don't think there's any places round here that take in guests."

"No, I don't mind. I like it," said Malcolm stoutly. "But I'll need to go to the toilet."

He needed more than that. They found a little coppice just outside a village called Birley, and Dick drove up the lane that bisected the trees and found a little open area between it and a field. They ate the sandwiches and the buns they'd bought at mid-

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day, and Malcolm drank a bottle of pop. That did it. He had to leave the car quickly and be sick under a tree.

"Not *very* sick," he said, accurately enough.

Then he was ready to sleep.

Dick dozed. He found it difficult to get proper sleep on the rare occasions that they slept in the car. In the middle of the night he slipped out and acquired new number-plates in Birley—he couldn't find an abandoned car, but he took the plates off the oldest car he could find parked in the road. When he got back to his own car he spread himself over the two front seats and tried to sleep again. Sleep was very slow in coming, but when it did, it brought The Dream again. The Nightmare.

He dreamt he was driving away from a small town, out onto the wider road, Malcolm beside him, excited and chattering. All was well, wonderfully well, and they were laughing together, making silly jokes, and full of joy in each other's company, as ever.

Then, in his mirror, he saw at a distance a police car. It *couldn't* . . . No, of course it couldn't. Why should he assume they were after him? But he increased his speed a little. Then, with the special tempo of a dream, things began to take on the excitement of a car chase in a film. The police car increased its speed, too—not by very much, but enough to make sure they would catch up with him before long. Dick in his dream was much less cool than the Dick in real life. He could think of nothing else to do but increase his speed again. The police car did the same. "I've got to do something," Dick said to himself. "I've got to do something that shakes them off."

The road stretched straight ahead, but there was an intersection approaching. Dick swerved off onto a winding country road. On the left, though, was a wood, and seeing a lane into it Dick swerved aside again and went into it. Please God the police would go on. The road had been dry and there were no tire marks. But he kept up a good speed. The lane was rutted, the car jolting as it coped with the new conditions. In the seat beside him, Malcolm was crowing with delight and jumping up and down. As the car ploughed ahead down the lane as fast as Dick could push it, Malcolm released his seat belt and strained forward to see.

"Malcolm, belt yourself in again!" he called.

Suddenly, ahead were trees. The end of the lane, the reassertion of thick woodland. There was space enough between two of the trees, but as he aimed at it the car no longer did what he wanted, diverted by the roughness of the terrain and the thick undergrowth. The left-hand wing bashed with a shattering shock into one of the trees, and the boy in the seat beside him hurtled forward and hit the windscreen with a thud that . . .

Dick woke, sweating and shuddering. He was conscious that his

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half-waking mind had exerted some kind of control over his sleeping one, and had prevented him from screaming or trying to reach the boy in the backseat. Stiffly he got out of the car. Trees—that was what had set it off, and the little path winding through them. He fumbled in his pocket and lit a rare cigarette. Then soberly he went about his early-morning business, fetching a screwdriver and drill and starting to change the plates. He memorised the numbers as a precaution in case he was stopped. The old plates he buried.

He shivered in the cold of the morning. In the car, Malcolm was stirring. They could be on their way.

"We can treat ourselves tonight," he said to the little boy, who was still rubbing his eyes. "Look at the money we've saved."

"Can we have breakfast soon?" said Malcolm, whose mind focussed on immediate rather than long-term prospects.

When Selena Randall had left the police station, Inspector Purley looked at DC Lackland, who had sat in on the interview.

"What did you think?"

"Still hung up on publicity, using the tabloids, getting on television, that kind of thing."

"Yes. I don't think I got through to her."

"You got through while she was sitting here, but it won't last five minutes once she gets home and is sick with worry. She's bound to clutch at straws."

"I know. But the case of Carol Parker *is* different. While there was a chance her son was in the country, there was a point to the television appeals. Frankly, the appearance Mrs. Randall saw yesterday on daytime television was useless. The woman should be in Germany, not here. That's where the child will be by now."

"And they're not inviting her."

"No. And the police there are doing bugger-all. The boy was born in Germany and as far as they're concerned, he's a German citizen. The father doesn't have him now, but he's a Catholic with family ramifications from one end of the country to another. The boy could be with any of them, and even if they found him, he wouldn't be sent back to his mother. That's German law, and the Common Market hasn't changed that."

"So really, Mrs. Randall is in a more hopeful position?"

"Yes. But try telling that to her. The main thing is, we're pretty sure the child is still in the country. She had one of these tormenting phone calls only three days ago, from Romford. Once we get hold of the child, returning him to her will be a mere formality. If he was abroad, she'd be bogged down in the local judicial system for years."

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"On the other hand, we don't seem to be any nearer to discovering where the two of them might be."

"No, and that's because they're *not* anywhere. They're everywhere, zigzagging hither and yon to create confusion. Nevertheless, the indications are that Dick Randall is a good father. I just hope she's not fooling herself about that. If he is, he must be considering the future, facing the fact that the boy needs to be settled, have friends, go to nursery school, live in a house he recognises and relates to. If he finds somewhere and goes on with his burglaries, the local police are going to start seeing a pattern, because he's not going to be able to go very far afield."

DC Lackland screwed up his face sceptically.

"The police up here apparently didn't discover a pattern when he was a teenage Raffles," he said.

"Good point. We need to alert them to the pattern. The other thing is, the balance of sightings and traces seems to be shifting. There's still some zigzagging—Romford was a piece of cheek, to suggest they'd gone to ground in London, but it was a rogue report. The balance is shifting southwards. Nothing in the North for over three weeks. It's been Midlands, South, shifting westwards. I'm going to concentrate on alerting police in Devon, Dorset, Cornwall—that's where he's going to be found."

"The West Country does attract a lot of drifters and oddballs," conceded Lackland.

"Maybe. Though no more than places like Brighton and Tunbridge Wells. The West at this time of year is a good place to be anonymous in."

"So, no television appearances for Selena Randall?"

"No. . . . Even if other things were equal, and even if we could persuade them to slot her in, I'd be doubtful about putting her on the Esther Rantzen programme, or the Richard and Judy show."

"Oh? Why?"

"Mrs. Parker is effective because she's blazingly angry with her ex-husband. She hates him. It comes across white-hot to the listener."

"Whereas Selena Randall is still half in love with hers?"

"Yes. More than half. And not only that: She still thinks of him as a good man."

"In spite of those phone calls."

"Yes, in spite of them. The message coming from her would be very blurred, or no message at all." He mused, with the wisdom of the police force over the years, unalloyed by feminism, or any other -ism: "Funny things, women."

This was a sentiment DC Lackland could agree with.

The woman who opened the door of Lane's End, in the village of Briscow, was comfortable, attractive, and brightly dressed: a

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woman in her late forties, neither well-off nor on her uppers, but at ease with life and still full of it.

"Yes?" Good, broad, open smile.

"I wondered if you have a room for the night," said Dick.

She looked at the open face, the lean figure, the little boy on his shoulders. The smile of welcome became still more warming.

"I do that," she said. "Come on in and have a look at it."

She led the way upstairs and pushed open a door. Two single beds pushed together, chintz as a bed covering, chintz at the windows, and the sun streaming through on the gleaming wooden furniture. It looked like heaven.

"This is wonderful," said Dick. "Isn't it, Malcolm?"

"Yes!" said Malcolm, already a connoisseur.

"Are there just the two of you? Is his m—" She stopped on seeing Dick give a tiny shake of the head. "Well, if you take it that will be seventeen pounds fifty a night, and I can do a proper evening meal for six pounds extra—three for the little boy."

They closed the deal at once, there in the sunlight. Already there was a warmth between the three of them which had, in the case of the two adults, a little to do with sex, more to do with aesthetic appreciation, likeness of spirit, a feeling of some kind of reawakening. Dick had consciously begun shaping his story accordingly.

Later in the evening, after a good dinner where his own preferences had been consulted and Malcolm's still more, Dick put the boy to bed, read him to sleep, then by invitation went downstairs to the living room for coffee.

"Will it be coffee, or would you prefer a beer?"

"Coffee, please. I can never get used to beer in cans."

She came forward, her hand held out rather shyly.

"I've been silly, and haven't told you my name. I'm Margaret Cowley—Peggy to my friends."

"And I'm Colin Morton," said Dick, shaking the hand warmly. "I'm sorry I had to stop you, Peggy, when you were going to ask about his mother. It's something I've been trying to stop him thinking about. If he was a little older it would be different."

They were talking in the doorway of the kitchen now, and the percolator was making baritone noises.

"It was silly of me to even think of asking. It's not my business, and these days, with everyone's marriage breaking down, it's much the best plan not to ask."

Dick shook his head. "Oh, it's nothing like that. Malcolm's mother died, in childbirth. We were expecting a little girl, and we knew there were complications, but somehow—"

"Oh, I *am* sorry." She turned to face him. His eyes were full. "So it was a tragedy clean out of the blue?"

"If the doctors suspected anything serious, they kept it from us."

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"Poor little boy. And poor you both, of course."

"I'm trying to put it behind us, make a fresh start."

"New place, new life?"

"Very much so." He had blinked his eyes free of the tears, and now smiled bravely. "Everything in the old house reminded me . . . and though with a little boy memories fade, still, I do try to keep his mind on other things. *He's* got to look to the future, even if I find it difficult, and keep . . . well, rambling in my mind back to the past. Stop me if I do that."

"Isn't life a bitch?" Peggy Cowley's voice held genuine bitterness. "I lost my husband a couple of years ago. Massive heart attack. He was in his late sixties, but these days that seems no age."

"It doesn't." He thought to himself that she must have married a man fifteen or twenty years older than herself, and his thought showed on his face.

"Yes, he was quite a bit older," Peggy said. "Second marriage for him. But it was a very happy one."

"No children?"

"No. Perhaps that was why it was a happy marriage." They both laughed, but Peggy immediately kicked herself for her tactlessness. "I don't mean it. We'd have loved to have kiddies, but it just didn't happen. I'd have liked to have one to lean on when he died. It would have made all the difference. And even little Malcolm: You'll have found he keeps your mind occupied and stops you grieving too much, I'll be bound."

Dick nodded. He had thought himself into the situation.

"Yes, he does. But sometimes I look at him and . . ." Again there were tears in his eyes and he took out a handkerchief. He shook himself. "That's what I said to stop me doing."

"Not when you're on your own. It will do you good."

"And what about you? Do you have a job? Or can you make ends meet with the bed-and-breakfast trade?"

"Oh, I make ends meet and a bit better than that. I've got the cottage as well."

Peggy's intention had been to drop this information casually into the conversation, but both immediately knew what was at issue.

"You have a cottage?" Dick's voice had an equally bogus neutrality. They didn't look at each other, but they were intensely aware of each other.

"Yes, just a tiny place at the bottom of the garden and across the lane. It doesn't take more than two or three unless they squeeze themselves in. Actually the last of the Easter tenants leave in a couple of days' time. I've got no bookings then until the school holidays start in July."

Dick drained his coffee, and she filled his cup. Then she sat back

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peaceably and watched him sipping. They needed no words. Dick had half made the decision when he saw her at the door. That was why he had given her the name which was on the false papers he had got from an old contact when he was first contemplating snatching his son. The whole of the last couple of hours had felt like a coming to rest, the thing that all the last few weeks had been leading up to.

"I'd need a job," he said. "That's not easy in the West Country, is it?"

"It's possible, if you'll take the jobs that nobody else wants," said Peggy. Dick was doing sums.

"How much do you charge for the cottage?"

"Oh, we can work something out as far as that goes."

"No, I don't want you to lose out," said Dick emphatically. "There's no earthly reason why you should lose out financially by allowing a stranger to sponge off you."

Though they both knew perfectly well that there was one possible reason. Sex had edged its way more explicitly to the forefront of both their minds.

"I'd give the place at a reasonable rent to anyone who'd take it and look after it in the low season," said Peggy stoutly. "Stands to reason. It's always better to have a place occupied, with a bit coming in for it. Empty, you're just asking for squatters and burglars."

"I suppose that's true," said Dick, who knew better than most. "Where is the nearest job centre?"

"Oh, that's way away, in Truro. You ought to look for something more local first. They're wanting a relief barman at The Cornishman, just down the road."

"Oh? I've never done bar work, but I've worked in hotels, so I know what's involved and I'm pretty sure I could get the hang of it. What's the catch?"

"It's just lunchtime. Eleven to three. That doesn't suit most people. Oh, and there'd be a bit of cellar work in addition."

"I might be able to supplement it with Income Support. Keep on the lookout for other things." Other sources of income flashed through his mind, but he resolved to use those skills only very sparingly, if he used them at all.

"Anyway," said Peggy, getting up to clear away the cups, "I'll just leave the thought with you. We can go and have a look at the cottage tomorrow, if you're interested."

"And maybe go on to The Cornishman for a pub lunch. They do food at lunchtime?"

"Of course. That would be a big part of your work. Could well be a help with feeding the two of you. A lot of food goes to waste in a place like that."

As she washed up the cups and the dinner things in the kitchen

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Peggy felt a glow of satisfaction. She had gambled, and she felt pretty sure she had won. If she had not told Colin about the cottage, she might have had him and Malcolm in the house for a few days, maybe for a week. But by mentioning it, she might not have them *with* her, but she would have them *near* her for much longer than that. She'd had no doubt since clapping eyes on the pair of them that that was what she wanted.

That night, as he went up to bed, Dick said, "Better go. Malcolm may be needing me. First night in a strange place."

Unspoken because it did not need to be voiced was the thought that there would be other nights.

Selena Randall pulled a piece of paper towards her. For days she had felt she was going mad, so completely without event had her life become. No news from the police, nothing except attempts at reassurance. No sightings, no media interest, total absence even of those terrible, tantalising phone calls, which did at least tell her where they were at the moment they were made. She had to do something. It had been nagging at her mind for some days that perhaps she should appeal to him though the press, send an open letter to him through the *Daily Mail,* the paper that they had always taken.

"Dear Dick," she began. "I'm writing to tell you how much I miss you both, and how I long to have you back. It's now nearly four months since I saw Malcolm—" Longer than Carol Parker had been without her boy, she thought resentfully, but everyone knows about her loss, and nobody knows about mine. "—and I can't bear the thought that when I see him again he will hardly know me. I will see him again, won't I? Please, Dick, you couldn't be so cruel as to keep him from me forever, could you? I know you love him and will look after him. Please remember that I love him, too. There is not a day goes past, not a minute of the day, when I don't think of him. Remember how happy we were when he was born, you and me and him. I think you loved me then—loved me too much to want me to be so unhappy now. I know I loved you."

She paused. She wanted to add: "I love you still." Was that wise? The policeman would say no. Was it true? She wanted to write nothing but the truth. *Did* she still love him, after what he had done to her? *Could* she?

Seized by a sense of muddle and futility, not in her situation but in herself, her own mind, her own emotions, she laid her head down on the paper and sobbed her heart out.

They went to look at the cottage next morning, after the sort of breakfast dieticians throw up their hands at.

"I never put on weight," said Dick, munching away at his fried

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bread. "I expect Malcolm will be the same, after he's got over his chubbiness."

They looked at the boy, already tucking in messily to the toast and marmalade.

"Nothing wrong with chubbiness in a child," said Peggy.

When they'd washed up, Peggy only allowing Dick to help under protest, they set off down the back garden, then across the lane and to the tiny cottage. The tenants were just driving off when they got there, and they shouted that they were going to have a last look at Penzance.

"I wondered whether to go on to Penzance," said Dick, "when I was driving around looking for somewhere to stay. Somehow it seemed like the end of the road."

"You've got to give up thoughts like that, Colin," said Peggy urgently. "There's a great wide road ahead of you."

She didn't notice Malcolm looking up at her. He had never heard his father called Colin before.

The cottage was tiny—"bijou," the estate agents would probably have called it—and there was an ever-present danger of tumbling over the furniture. But it was bright and cheerful, with everything done in the same sort of taste as Peggy's own cottage. Malcolm thought it was wonderful, particularly the strip of lawn at the back, with the apple tree. It was warm enough for him to play in just his shorts, and they watched him as he tried to make friends with a very spry gray squirrel.

"It's ideal," said Dick to Peggy, both of them watching him protectively to see he didn't stray from the garden down towards the riverbank. "Sort of like a refuge."

"Don't think like that," urged Peggy again.

"All right—it's what I've been dreaming about since—you know. Is that positive enough for you? Now, will you let me take us all to the—what was it?—The Cornishman, and we'll have a good pub lunch."

They looked at each other meaningfully.

All the lunchtime regulars in the pub made them welcome for Peggy's sake. She had herself been a regular there when her husband was alive, but had been less frequent since. She was of the generation of women that didn't much like going into a pub on their own. They got themselves a table and settled in. Selecting the food was a big thing, because it was a good menu with plenty to appeal to a child. By the time they had made their decisions they seemed to have spoken to, or had advice from, half the customers in the Saloon Bar. When Jack, the landlord, brought the three piled-high plates to their table, Peggy said:

"You still looking for help at lunchtime, Jack?"

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"I am. There's folk that are willing, but not folk that are suitable."

Peggy looked in Dick's direction and winked.

"Oh aye?" said the landlord, interested. "Maybe we could have a chat later, young man, after your meal."

And so it was arranged. The talk was businesslike and decisive: Dick would come down the next couple of nights to learn the business, get into the routine, then he'd start work proper at the weekend. Peggy would look after Malcolm in the middle of the day—"It'll be a pleasure," she said, though she did wonder how she'd cope with the unaccustomed situation. The money was far from wonderful, but it would be welcome. Dick only worried about how much he seemed to be putting on Peggy.

"When we're well settled in, we'll start looking for a play group for Malcolm," he said.

"If it goes well, I might even start one myself," said Peggy.

It certainly went well at The Cornishman. Dick was a good worker and a good listener, and the pub's routines went like clockwork when he was on duty. He never mentioned his hotel training, but it showed. Jack thought he was manna from heaven and tried to press him into doing longer hours, but Dick was unwilling. The boy came first, he said, and he did. Nobody asked too much about his background. Everyone in the West Country is used to people passing through, casual temporary residents who come from heaven-knows-where and soon pass on. People knew that Dick had lost his wife, because Peggy had revealed that in conversation with a friend and it had got around. Nobody displayed curiosity beyond that.

Dick slept with Peggy the night he got the job. The mutual agreement was silent, and Peggy knew she had to go along with any conditions Dick attached to the affair. She knew already that Malcolm would always come first with Dick—and second and third as well. Dick stayed in her room for an hour or so, then went as usual to sleep beside the little boy in the two twin beds put together under the window.

The routine continued when he and Malcolm went to live and fend for themselves in the tiny cottage the other side of the back lane. The boy was used to finding himself alone at nights, and didn't worry about it. He knew it wouldn't be for long. Dick and Peggy developed a code between themselves. When he collected Malcolm, or when he met Peggy casually on his days off, he would say "See you soon" as they parted. That meant that he'd be up that night. Perhaps Peggy should have felt that she was being used, but she didn't. She was happy to have her hours with Malcolm, which were working out better than she could have believed possible with her lack of experience of children. She found him an

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enchanting child, and she was happy to have the all-too-brief time with Dick at night. She had expected little of her widowhood, and Dick was a wonderful and unexpected bonus.

By the middle of June they were a settled thing, or felt like it. Peggy was refusing all potential summer tenants for the cottage, and had managed to transfer the first bookings she had already accepted to another landlord in the area. Her friends knew what the situation was, and accepted it. Summer would be a lovely time, she knew. It was the time of year she had always enjoyed most, especially as Briscow was that bit off the tourist map. Colin would be working, of course, but he was still resisting the offer of extra hours because he didn't want to leave his son for most of the day. Malcolm was regaining his equilibrium, she felt, though it gave her a start one day when he said: "I haven't spoken to Mummy for *ages.*" It wouldn't be long before he forgot her, she thought.

Dick was happy, too. He knew he had landed on his feet. But always in Eden there lurked the serpent, in wait to spread his poison. Dick knew he was using Peggy—not sexually, because if anything, she was using him that way. But he knew he was getting a free childminder, lots of free meals, and he knew Peggy would be charging a lot more for the cottage if she was letting it on a weekly basis to her usual casual tourist clientele.

It irked him to be dependent—because that was what it was. It had been that that had started the rot between him and Selena. He was old-fashioned, he knew, but that was something he would never apologise for. He'd known when he planned to snatch Malcolm that his feelings for the boy were old-fashioned. And it was the same for his sense that he was becoming too dependent on Peggy.

The truth was, he could do with more money.

"It follows the pattern," said Inspector Purley. "Retired people, away from home, poor security, a nice little haul of jewelry, cash, and small household things—nothing spectacular, but worth having. *And* it's West Country."

"What if the next one's John o' Groats?" asked Lackland. "That's been the pattern so far—zigzagging all over the country."

"Ah, but it won't be from now on, you of little faith."

"Seems to me you're looking at it arse up," countered Lackland. "*You* decided he was headed for the West Country, and now we've got a possible case there, you take it as confirmation, even though we've had other possible cases all over the country. Dick Randall's not the only crook to target respectable retired people."

He did not dent his superior officer's complacent view of things.

"You mark my words," Purley said. "He's come to rest in the

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West Country, like all sorts of other people—artists, *retired people,* ageing hippies, travelling people, and all manner of rag-tag and bobtail. And having come to rest, he can't leave little Malcolm alone for long. The cases we think he was involved in were all over the country because so were they. Now the cases will all be in the West." He walked over and looked at a map on the wall. "This one was in a small village called Monpellon. The area includes Launceston, Bodmin, Padstow—places like that. That's where we'll be looking to, because that's where the two of them will have slung their hook."

"Well, I admire your confidence," said Lackland, who secretly, or not so secretly, did not.

"I'm so certain I'm right that I'll risk ridicule if he does turn up in John o' Groats and I'll alert the local police down there that I think that's where he is. One more strike and he may have given himself away."

Dick was his usual efficient and sympathetic self at lunchtime in The Cornishman, pulling pints now with the sure hand of an expert, bringing three or four laden plates at once from the kitchen into the bar and remembering who had ordered what. But at the back of his mind there was a niggling worry.

Peggy had not been quite her normal self when he had delivered Malcolm that morning, not quite the same in her manner. There hadn't been anything that you could pin down: You couldn't say she'd got the huff, decided she'd gone off him, was feeling she was being exploited. She was minding three or four other toddlers now—children whose mothers had got summer jobs when the holiday season had come upon them. The arrival of one of them at the door had covered over any awkwardness, but also prevented any attempt to sort things out. Dick was sure there was *something:* an alteration in her manner, a slight access of remoteness, even coldness.

"One chicken and chips, one roast pork, one steak-and-kidney pie, and one vegetable bake." He had a cheerful air as he served one of the families who had once been regulars of Peggy's, but had been found an alternative cottage this season. They were a fleshy, forceful family, and they took up their knives and forks with enthusiasm.

"Can hear you're from the North, too," said the wife, smiling at him in a friendly fashion.

"Me father was," said Dick. "Or should I say 'wor'? I can do the accent, and a bit of it has rubbed off onto me. But I come from Cambridge—and all round. I'm a bit of a rolling stone."

"Can't be too much of a rolling stone, now you've got little Mal-

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colm to consider," said the husband. "Champion little lad, that. We saw him when we dropped by to say hello to Peggy."

"Champion's the word for him," said Dick. "I call him 'Captain.' Can't remember how that started, but I certainly have to jump when he gives me orders!"

"Colin—two hamburgers and chips on the bar," called Jack, and Dick resumed his service of the crowded and cheerful bar. He didn't like it when people commented on his very slight Northern accent. He'd told Peggy early on that he came from Cambridge, and that was a lie he was now stuck with.

He got away from The Cornishman shortly after three, and went straight to pick Malcolm up. Peggy had got her manner under control now, and was friendly and pleasant as always. She looked him in the eye, but was—somehow, was he imagining it?—quite keen for an excuse to look away again. *Yes, I am imagining it,* said Dick to himself, settling Malcolm onto his shoulders to ride him piggyback to the cottage.

"See you soon, Peggy," he called. She looked up from the floor where she was playing with one of the other children.

"Oh—yes. Good," she said.

There is something wrong, thought Dick.

"I think this is a call you should take," said DC Lackland, and handed the receiver over to Purley.

"DI Purley speaking."

"Ah, now are you the man who's in charge of the disappearance of that little boy—the one who was snatched by his father in the Darlington area?"

The voice was pure County Durham.

"Yes, I am."

"Well, I'm speaking from Briscow in Cornwall."

"Oh yes?" The heightened interest in his voice was evident.

"That's right, but we're from Stockton, so we read about the case in the local newspapers. There wasn't a great deal in the national papers, was there?"

"No, there wasn't." It seemed as if he was being accused of not pressing for more, so he said: "The North is another country."

"Aye, you're right. Londoners aren't interested in what queer folk like us get up to. They'd rather not know. Any road, we've been coming to Cornwall for four years on the trot up to now, but this year our cottage was taken, let to a young man and a boy."

"Oh yes?" Purley was well trained in police neutrality but he couldn't keep a surge of interest out of his voice.

"Nice-enough-looking fellow, and a lovely little boy. I'm probably way out of order and on the wrong lines altogether, but the little

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boy is called Malcolm. That was the name of the little boy who was snatched, wasn't it?"

"That's right. The father is Richard Randall."

"This man is calling himself Colin Something-or-other. But the boy is Malcolm. I suppose he thought changing it would cause more problems than it would solve. If it *is* them."

"This man is not a local, I take it."

"No, no, of course not. He's been here since early spring, I believe. And he has a slight Northern accent."

"Really?"

"Yes. Says he got it from his father. But if you were brought up in Cambridge like he says he was, you wouldn't have your father's accent, would you?"

"It sounds unlikely."

"The story is that the little boy's mother died in childbirth. We had that from Peggy, his landlady, the woman who minds the nipper while he works at the pub."

"Right. And Peggy's name and address are?"

"Peggy Cowley, Lane's End Cottage, Deacon Street, Briscow, Cornwall."

"I'm grateful to you, very grateful."

When he had got the man's name and address and his Stockton address, too, Purley banged down the telephone in triumph.

"Got him!"

"You haven't got him at all yet," said Lackland, who enjoyed playing the spoilsport. "And Malcolm's a common enough name."

"I feel a pricking of my thumb," said Purley, refusing to be dampened. "Get me Launceston police."

"So how was your day, Captain?" asked Dick, watching Malcolm get his hands very sticky from a jam sandwich. Malcolm, as always, considered at length.

"Jemima was very naughty," he announced.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that." Jemima was one of the other children Peggy minded, and in Malcolm's opinion she was a Bad Lot.

"She spilt her lemonade and broke the little wooden horse."

"Good Lord, fancy poor old Peggy having to cope with a naughty little girl like that."

"She should have smacked her but she didn't."

After tea, when Malcolm was absorbed in a jigsaw puzzle of Postman Pat with large but bewildering pieces, Dick said:

"I'm just popping over to Peggy's, I think we left your pully there."

"My pully's in the—" Malcolm began. But his father was already out of the door.

I want this thing sorted out, thought Dick, as he crossed the lane

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and ran up the bank and onto Peggy's long back lawn. *It can't wait till tonight. This sort of thing can fester. And if I can't tell her the truth, I'll tell her a lie. It won't be the first time.*

Dick had as great a confidence in his ability to fabricate plausible stories as he had in his eye for a robbable house.

He was about to round the side of Peggy's cottage when he heard voices from outside the front door.

"And when did you say this man and his son took the cottage?"

"Back in March," came Peggy's voice, reassuringly normal. "I'd have the precise dates in my records. They stayed a couple of nights bed-and-breakfast, then took the cottage."

"Are they still there?"

"Yes."

"What name is the man using?"

"The man's name is Colin Morton," came Peggy's voice emphatically.

"And does he say he's divorced?" asked the young sergeant, his hard-looking face intimidating, his eyes like deep, cold lakes.

"Colin is a widower," said Peggy firmly.

"Oh yes? And what does he say his wife died of?"

"His wife died in childbirth. Look, it's not me you should be asking these questions, it's him. He'll have all the papers and things." Thinking she heard movement from the back garden, she went on talking brightly. "But really I *know* that's true. I've seen a picture of the poor girl with little Malcolm. Such a nice face she had, pretty but loving, too. Colin keeps that in his wallet, because he doesn't want the little lad to be reminded of his mother—says that if he'd been a little older when his mother died it would be different, but—"

"And this 'Colin,' he's working locally, is he?" the sergeant interrupted.

"Yes, he's working lunchtimes at The Cornishman. They think the world of—"

"That can't bring in much. He is paying you rent for the cottage, is he?"

The implication was brutally obvious. Peggy chattered on, seeming to take no notice, but really she was speaking from the front of her mind only. The back of her mind was remembering the night before. The electricity had fused just as she was making her late-night drink. She had no overnighters in the second bedroom, but something—she was reluctant to analyse precisely what—made her want it fixed that night. Dick had done it before, and made light of it. Surely he wouldn't mind. It would be the first time . . . She rummaged in the dark to find her torch in the kitchen drawer, and then set off across the lawn towards the cottage.

The car was not there. The cottage was in darkness and the lit-

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tle dirt square to the side where Dick kept the car was empty. Malcolm was sleeping in the cottage on his own. The moment she thought this she realized how silly she was being, and what a hypocrite: Malcolm was there on his own asleep all the hours Dick spent in her bed. But that thought raised new fears and doubts. Where was Dick now? In someone's bed? He met all sorts of women while he was serving in the pub. He could have made a date with one of them. The thought that she was nothing more than his piece on the side, and that he'd gone on to more desirable pieces, tormented her. It felt like treachery. It felt like the end of her good life.

She retreated to her garden and stood in the darkness behind a bushy rhododendron. Eventually she heard Dick's car. Well over half an hour had passed since she'd begun waiting. The car came up the lane and was parked in the usual place beside the cottage. She saw Dick's profile before he switched the car lights off, saw him get out of the car. He was wearing a drab jerkin and was carrying that old bag of his. Somehow he didn't look as if he was returning from a sexual assignation.

When he had disappeared into the cottage, she turned and trudged back to her darkened house, somewhat relieved in her mind, but still doubtful. What *did* one look like when one returned from a sexual assignation? she asked herself. And even if he was not, where *had* he been? What *had* he been doing?

"Now, if you'll take us to the cottage—" said the sergeant.

"I can get the key if you like, then you can look over it if they're not in," said Peggy.

She was not betraying them, merely giving Dick time to get them both away. She pottered inside to take as long as possible to find the key. In her heart she knew he was the man they were looking for. In her heart she knew she had lost them both.

"Come on, Captain, we're going for a drive," shouted Dick as he ran through the tiny living room, tripping over a coffee table, then righting himself and dashing up the stairs. When he came down, clutching the bag, heavy from last night, Malcolm was still on the floor with his jigsaw.

"Why are we going for a drive, Daddy? It's nearly my bedtime."

Dick grabbed his jacket, then picked up the little boy and ran out with him.

"It's a lovely evening for a drive," he said, shoving him in the car, but taking care to click the belt in place around him. He ran round to the driver's door, and the key was in the ignition and the car being backed into the lane before Malcolm could make further protest.

He knew he shouldn't drive fast through the village. He tried to

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moderate his speed, but he was possessed by the urgency of the situation. As he scorched past The Cornishman he saw that one of the local policemen was having an off-duty pint at a little rustic table the landlord had set out for good summer days. In his mirror he saw him getting out his mobile phone.

He knew the roads around Briscow now like a connoisseur. He took a shortcut, then another, then was out not onto the motorway but on the old main road to Bristol. Now he could really open up. If only he had had a new car, or any really powerful one. With a bit of luck the police vehicle wouldn't be much better than his. He put five miles between him and Briscow, then six, seven.

Then he saw the police car in the mirror. Moments later he heard its siren.

The police car wasn't an old banger, or even a sedate family model Ford. It was gaining on him. He pushed the accelerator down to the floor. He was seized momentarily with exhilaration, but at the back of his mind something outside of him seemed to be shouting: The Dream. The Nightmare. And then he began to sweat, and a quieter voice whispered to him: the dead child. He tried to continue, tried to squeeze more speed out of the car, but his heart was not in it. In the mirror he saw the police car gaining on him, its siren gathering in intensity.

He took his foot off the accelerator. The car dropped speed, began coasting. He changed lanes, let the car slow down, then let it chug to the side of the road and stop. As he pulled on the hand brake the police car came to a halt in front of him. Two policemen jumped out and ran over to lean in his window. One had a hard face and piercing cruel eyes. The younger one had unformed features but compassionate eyes.

"Are you Richard Randall, going by the name of Colin Morton?" the sergeant asked, flicking his ID in his face. Dick considered, then nodded.

"You know it all, I expect," he said. "Yes, I am."

"And this is your son Malcolm Randall?"

"Yes, it is."

"Richard Randall, I am arresting you . . ."

The policemen agreed to drop Malcolm off at Peggy's as a temporary measure. Dick knew hard-eyes wouldn't want the embarrassment of a child around him cramping his style. "You must be nice to Mummy when you go home," he said to the boy as Peggy came out to collect him, not looking him in the face. "She must have missed you all this time."

When he was alone with the policemen, driving to the station in Launceston, he suddenly broke down. It was the end of his dream, the very end. Somehow it felt like the end of his life.

He looked up, red-eyed, at the young constable handcuffed to

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him in the backseat of the car.

"Will you tell his mother I would never have done anything to harm him? That's why I stopped. I love that boy. Tell Selena it's all up to her now. Will you tell her that exactly?"

"Of course I will. What if she asks what you mean?"

He didn't answer directly.

"Tell her I don't want to see her, or the boy. She'll understand. Tell her it's all up to her."

Then they drew into Launceston Police Station and began the long business of interviews and charging.

Having Malcolm back was like a dream for Selena. Inspector Purley had flown down to Bristol the night of Dick's arrest, hired a car, then participated in interviews the next day. He had phoned Selena to say they were sure it was Malcolm and he'd bring him back up North the next day. No point in her coming down.

It was late afternoon when his car had driven up the street and parked outside her Darlington home. She had rushed to the front door just in time to hear the inspector say, "Run to Mummy," and, picking the little bundle up, to hug him, kiss him. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the inspector raise a hand, then get back into his car and drive off.

Malcolm was grown out of all recognition, and was confident beyond belief. He gravely inspected his old toys, told her what he'd most like for tea, and ran around the garden when she told him that Finny the cat was out there. All his talk and memories were of Daddy, and he'd tell her quite disjointedly things they'd done on the road, how Daddy had taken him away, how Jemima at Peggy's was always naughty. When he asked her, "Are you my mummy now?" she had almost choked, and had taken him in her arms and said they'd never be apart again.

Later in the evening she had a phone call from the young constable in Launceston. She was almost incoherent in her joy and thanks, and she was really grateful to get Dick's message to her.

"I suppose they'll be bringing him back up North for trial," she said wistfully. "I could go and see him then."

"He doesn't want that. He doesn't . . . feel he should see you or Malcolm." Being a kind-hearted young man, he added: "Yet. I don't think he feels the time is ripe."

Selena was sad, but she didn't have time to stay sad. Soon it was time for bed, but first she had to wash away the grime and mustiness of travel from the little boy. She ran the bath, just lukewarm as he liked it, and Malcolm insisted on undressing himself, a new departure for Selena, who had always done it in the past. She wondered at his chubbiness—what *had* Dick been feeding him on?—but saw how good and competent he was in all the little

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things he did for himself.

He climbed into the bath himself, slowly, seriously, but once in, he was more interested in his old rubber duck than in washing himself. Still a child in some things, Selena thought. She worked up a soapy lather on his flannel and began washing him herself. It was pure pleasure, and it felt as if she was washing off all those months when only his father had had him, seen him grow. She leant over the bath to wash the far side of him, and it was then that she saw it.

The birthmark on his hip.

The oval-shaped birthmark, like a rugby ball, on the left hip. Just as she had seen it described in television interviews, in newspaper articles, by Carol Parker. This wasn't Malcolm. This was Anton Parker, born Anton Weissner, when his mother was married to his German father. She let the flannel fall, felt faint, and sank back onto the chair by the wall. Anton played on, oblivious, dipping the duck's head under the water as he had seen ducks do at Briscow.

It was Dick who had snatched Anton. That was six days after he had snatched Malcolm. In that time Malcolm must have died. She felt tears come into her eyes for her lost child, but she suppressed them. She had to think, to be practical. How had he died? Naturally? In a car chase, perhaps? There had been various sightings and police pursuits. Dick had taken this little boy as a substitute, called him Malcolm, taught him to call himself Malcolm. That's why he would not let him say more than a word or two on the phone, in case she recognised or suspected this was not her boy. She thought of Carol Parker, desperate and dispirited, appealing on British television, convinced that her husband had taken their son to Germany, forever.

Then she remembered her husband's words: "It's all up to her now." Suddenly they had quite a new meaning. From the bath came splashings and chuckles of pleasure. She drew her head up straight and opened her eyes.

"Come along, Malcolm—out of the bath now and let Mummy dry you." ●

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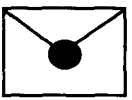

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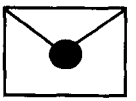

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Art by Daniel Galanaugh

A Good Day's Work

by Rick Riordan

"I'd just as soon show you the door," Dr. Pauerstein told me. "But since my wife insists . . ."

He tossed a stack of twenties on the kitchen table, right on top of Alva Cruz's picture.

He was obviously used to dealing with hirelings this way. Cash up front, no muss with taxes, no questions about green cards. Hedge my lawn. Wash my matching BMWs. Find a missing girl. Just don't bother me.

He wiped under his nose with a gold-ringed finger, then went back to sorting his plastic-surgery photos.

His wife tried not to react when he dropped a new one next to her breakfast plate—a glossy eight-by-ten of a nip-and-tuck, sliced cheeks lifted from the face like pocket flaps. I wondered if Mrs. Pauerstein ate breakfast with these faces every morning. Maybe that's why she wore a permanent wince.

"Please, Mr. Navarre," she said. "It's been two weeks."

Next to her, the maid Zuli, the mother of the missing girl, sat silent. She hadn't looked at me since I'd arrived.

©2003 by Rick Riordan

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I brushed the money off her daughter's picture.

Alva Cruz was a striking young woman—long black hair, amber eyes, Spanish complexion very different from her mother's mestizo features. In the photograph, Alva was sitting on the hood of one of the green convertible BMWs I'd seen in the Pauersteins' driveway. Her smile was a challenge—*You gonna make me move?* I could see how she might attract the wrong kind of attention in a bar.

The doctor glanced up at me, frowning that I was still in his house. "Well? There's the money."

"I haven't taken the job yet."

"Then get the hell out," he growled. "And don't expect to work again. I'll make sure everyone in town knows you're a waste of time."

Meaning, of course, everyone he knew. Nobody else counted.

But there was a twitch in his eye that I didn't quite understand, a hint of relief in his voice that I might be leaving. That alone made me want to stay.

"Angelito's," I said to Zuli. "That's the bar on South St. Mary's?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"What did the police say?"

"They were no help," Mrs. Pauerstein put in. "They found a witness who saw Alva leave willingly with a short Hispanic man, about five foot four. She got in his yellow pickup truck and they drove away. That's all the police know. They aren't concerned. They told us she would turn up eventually."

I looked down at Alva's picture—that challenge of a smile. *Well, hot shot?*

"Mrs. Cruz, you didn't report her missing for three days. Why?"

Zuli seemed to be turning to stone. "She's done this before, sir. With men. But not for so long. Something has happened."

"Please, Mr. Navarre," Mrs. Pauerstein said again. "You came highly recommended."

"By some idiot at your day spa," the doctor grumped. "Don't beg this man, Beth!"

"Zuli has been with us almost twenty years," she persisted. "We've known Alva since . . . since she was a child. We want to help."

Rick Riordan's Edgar-winning Tres Navarre series debuted in 1997 and won both a Shamus and an Anthony award. Three more books followed, the most recent, *The Devil Went Down to Austin,* again claiming nominations for the Anthony and the Shamus. The Texas author took a break from Navarre to produce 2003's stand-alone thriller *Cold Springs,* a book ALA calls one of the year's top ten crime novels. Until Navarre's return in a novel ('04), the author plans to feature him in stories.

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"This is absurd," Dr. Pauerstein said. "I'm sorry, Zuli, but Alva's a grown woman. We can't go chasing after her every time she throws a tantrum."

"A tantrum?" I asked.

No one volunteered an explanation, but I felt the history there, deep as well water.

I was thinking over the bad possibilities, the bad things that could happen to a pretty girl in a West Side bar on Halloween. I didn't like the description of the guy she'd left with, either—a short man in a conspicuous yellow truck. Not a happy camper. Not a person who would be nice to women.

Then I looked at Dr. Pauerstein, who was silently urging me to refuse. And Zuli, who was hurting, suffering, and had only these people, whose countertops she'd been scrubbing for twenty years, cleaning carefully around Dr. Pauerstein's pictures of cosmetically mutilated faces.

Or maybe I just thought about my rent, which was due that week.

I said, "I'll find Alva for you."

Later that morning I found the police's witness—Luisa Rodriguez, a girlfriend of Alva's who'd been with her on Halloween. Luisa couldn't remember anything she hadn't already told the cops, but she said it didn't matter. Alva had been looking for trouble for years. She found it. Screw her. Who cared?

"Her mother," I answered.

"Chingate," Luisa spat. "Her mother gave a shit, she would have gotten Alva out of that trap a long time ago."

"What trap?"

She gave me a hard look. "You were at the asshole's mansion, you didn't notice?"

"Dr. Pauerstein and Alva didn't get along?"

She laughed. "They got along since Alva was fifteen. You think he kept Zuli around because she cleans good, mister?"

I let that sink in, and started wondering how Dr. Pauerstein might look if I gave him some of my own complimentary facial reconstruction.

"Alva was getting angry about being used," I guessed. "There was some kind of big argument at the Pauerstein house. Had she threatened to go public?"

Luisa shrugged, but I could see an unsettling thought forming behind her eyes.

"So you're mad at her," I said. "Mad enough you wouldn't care if she's dead?"

"I don't know anything."

"If Pauerstein did something to her, I'll crucify the asshole. I

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wish you'd help."

I started to leave, but she called me back.

Her eyes were wet.

"We were supposed to go to college together," she told me. "We were going to be business majors, open a restaurant someday. Instead, she stayed out of school, kept waiting for that asshole to divorce his wife. The day before she disappeared, she said she was giving up on him. She was going to tell the whole town she'd been raped as a child, throw as much shit in his face as she could. She'd told me all that before, but this time . . . I don't know, maybe she was serious."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah." She wiped a streak of mascara off her eyelid. "You doing anything Friday night?"

I spent the afternoon at Angelito's Cantina, buying beers with Dr. Pauerstein's money. One guy, Iago, tried to kill me with a pool cue, and then—with his face pressed against the corner pocket—admitted he might know the short guy I was looking for: Frankie somebody. A minor-league hit man.

That led me to my friend Ralph Arguello, who sat in his pawnshop office posting merchandise on eBay. At any given time, Ralph had five to ten thousand items cooking on the Internet, but that was nothing compared to the list in his head—names, addresses, incriminating dirt on every player in San Antonio. Ralph could tell you who was buying, who was selling, and who was controlling the bids.

I said, "Hit man named Frankie. Short Latino, yellow truck."

"Frank Tejeda," he said. "Been on his way down, staying at the Salado Inn. You know it?"

"I'm afraid so."

Ralph grinned, gesturing toward his wall of pawned weapons—assault rifles, bayonets, samurai swords. "Cut you a deal, *vato?*"

The Salado Inn bordered a dry creek bed on Highway 90, on the outskirts of Bexar County where worn-out subdivisions gave way to worn-out ranch land. Ten dilapidated red cabins formed a U around a gravel courtyard. Even the soft light of dusk couldn't make the place look good.

Over the years, it had enjoyed an illustrious history as an Asian massage parlor, a heroin-junkie commune, and a training camp for low-budget evangelists. Now, in its old age, it had settled down as a residence motel, a sign out front promising good rates by the month, year, or decade.

There was no yellow truck parked anywhere that I could see.

Behind Cabin One, I found an old guy with a chain saw sculpting four-foot-tall armadillos out of juniper logs. After some compliments on his artwork, and a twenty-dollar bill, he was willing to tell me that Frank Tejeda—"oh yeah, the short spic"—stayed in Cabin Four.

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"Hasn't been around in a couple weeks," the old man added. "Since that woman, awhile back. That was the last time."

"What woman?"

"Hell, I don't know. Ask him."

Then he revved up the chain saw and went back to expressing himself.

Frank Tejeda's cabin was unlocked, the inside depressing even by slum standards—one gray room with a tiny bathroom and kitchenette in back, a card table, a chair, and a stripped bed that sagged like a relief map of the California Central Valley. The sink was full of dishes. The back door was a sheet of plywood postered with pages from an old Chinese restaurant calendar. Strewn around the floor were men's clothes, ammo boxes, beer bottles, and Taco Cabana bags.

It was hard to know, in the disaster area, whether anything was out of place, but I found no suitcase, no gun locker, no valuables. Nothing I would expect to find if Tejeda planned on coming back. Gone about two weeks—about when Alva Cruz disappeared.

I stood in the center of his room, listening to the sounds of the chain saw and the highway, trying to imagine Alva Cruz coming here of her own will. A good-looking young woman with plans to go to college, with a mom who cared about her—surely she wouldn't hate herself so much that she'd spend the night with someone who lived here.

Then I saw a glint on the floor by the back door.

I knelt to look. A silver earring—an angel—was snagged in the grimy crack between doorjamb and threshold. A long strand of black hair trailed from the hook.

I had to jostle the back door's makeshift lock to get it open.

When I finally did, I realized the neighbor's chain saw had been loud enough to cover the sound of a car pulling up—a yellow truck, in fact, parked right behind the cabin, between the back door and the woods of the creek bed.

A short Mexican man stood on the back step, pointing a shotgun at my heart.

He said, "You need to die."

"Ralph Arguello sent me."

I wondered what level of hell I'd go to if I died violently with a lie on my lips, but it was a good lie. Ralph's name had been known to cause hesitation even among psychopaths.

Frank Tejeda furrowed his brow, his finger tense on the trigger.

I could see why nobody had given a good description of him—there just wasn't much special about him, except that he was short and about to kill me. He had the typical weathered face, the sour demeanor, the dusty flannel-and-jeans look of a hundred thousand guys on the West Side.

Of course, having somebody point a shotgun at you does sharpen your focus. I spent the next eternal second studying Frank

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Tejeda's St. Christopher medal, the bloodshot vein like a river delta in his left eye.

"Inside," he said at last. "Back up slow."

When we were standing in the bedroom, Frank apparently satisfied I hadn't brought a date with me, he said, "What's Ralph want?"

"Alva Cruz."

The barrel of the gun dipped, but not long enough for me to act. "Who?"

"You picked her up at Angelito's," I said. "Halloween night."

"Hell I did."

"You didn't clean up, Frank. You killed her, dragged her out the back—her earring is snagged over there on the doorframe."

When he looked, I grabbed the shotgun barrel and kicked him in the face.

The gun fired into the wall behind me. Completely deaf, I wrestled Frank to the ground and got my knee between his shoulder blades.

I frisked him, came up with some brass knuckles, a switchblade, and a pack of Chiclets.

"I didn't do it," he said. *"¡Lo juro!"*

"Uh-huh."

"Take me to Ralph. I'll tell him—"

"Ralph doesn't have a damn thing to do with this, Frankie. This is about you and me and a dead young girl you dragged out your back door. Where is she?"

"I don't know."

A little more knee-pressure on his spine and he started yelling that maybe he did know, after all.

I hauled him off the floor and together we took a walk out back.

Alva Cruz was heartbreakingly close.

Fifty yards down in the creek bed, inexpertly wrapped in black Hefty bags, the maid's daughter was slowly being shrouded with yellow acacia leaves. One pale hand had escaped the plastic. Her fingers curled delicately toward the sky, the nails painted orange in honor of her last holiday.

Cold temperatures had reduced the stench of death, but it was still there—a little stronger than your average roadkill, which the Salado Inn residents had probably mistaken it for.

"You son of a bitch," I said.

"I swear," Frank said. "I wouldn't—"

His eyes slid from my face to the shotgun, which I'd taken the liberty of reloading.

"Shit, man." He swallowed. "She and me were getting along good that night. I left her before dawn 'cause . . . 'cause I had a job to do, right? I figured I'd let her sleep. I came back that afternoon, she was dead."

"How?"

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"Shot in the chest—once, like a handgun, close range. I'm on probation, man. Killed my ex-wife 'bout five years ago—manslaughter. The police weren't gonna believe me."

"So you dumped her."

"I freaked, man. Two weeks I've been hiding out, but nobody looked for me. There was nothing on the news. So I came back tonight. Figured I'd do a better job. But shit, I wouldn't kill her! We had plans. She was gonna . . ." He hesitated, staring down at the glistening black bundle that used to be a young woman.

"She was going to what?"

He licked his lips. "Blackmail. This rich guy, been sleeping with her since she was a kid. Guess his image was important to him. She told him a hundred grand, or she was gonna tell the town, cause a big scandal. She was sure he'd pay, told me she'd cut me in."

Tejeda looked up. He must've sensed my anger turning elsewhere. "You believe me, don't you? Hell yes. It was the rich guy that killed her. I don't know shit, man. I just met her. Hell, I contract for money. Last thing I would do is invite a hit to my home."

"Either you killed her," I said, "or you messed up the crime scene so bad the real killer might never be caught. Either way, you deserve the police. Get back up the hill."

He protested, pleaded, threatened, begged. But I had the shotgun.

After I'd tied Frank's hands and ankles, I called the Bexar County Sheriff's Department. Then I called the Pauersteins' home number.

Zuli Cruz answered.

There wasn't much choice, so I told her the news.

I would've been okay had she wailed out her grief, but she took the news of her daughter's death in stony silence. Five cars went by on the highway before she spoke.

"You have the killer?" she asked.

I told her about Frank Tejeda, his plea of innocence, his story of blackmail.

"The police won't believe him," I said. "Do you?"

More silence.

"Zuli, I'm sorry. But how long have you known Dr. Pauerstein was sleeping with your daughter?"

She hung up the phone, and my mouth tasted like sand.

A few minutes later, the old man with the chain saw came over to see what was going on. Why had I hogtied his neighbor on the front porch?

I told him.

"Damn," he said. "I thought the woman left."

"No. She's dead by the creek. I just saw her."

The old man scratched his head. "But I saw her drive away. Came in after he did that night. Left after he did the next morning. Don't see a car like hers too often here, reason I remember."

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The world did a little shift. I said, "Describe the car."

"BMW. Green convertible BMW."

"Hold Frank for the police," I told him. "He moves, use the chain saw."

"Where the hell you going?"

But I was already running for my car.

I should've known something was wrong from the stillness of the Pauerstein house. In the darkness, its two front windows blazed yellow, so the place seemed to be watching, alert like an owl on the hunt. Only one of the convertible BMWs was in the driveway. I hoped that meant Dr. Pauerstein was still at work.

I found Mrs. Pauerstein and Zuli sitting in the spotless kitchen, staring despondently at a .45 automatic on the table between them. My first impression: They had known where Dr. Pauerstein kept his gun. They'd taken it from its hiding place. Now they were trying to decide what to do when he came home. They looked like wax figures of people on their way to the guillotine.

"My husband," Mrs. Pauerstein said, without looking up. "If it's true, I won't defend what he did."

"You don't have to," I said. "He didn't kill anyone."

Zuli looked at me, then, for the first time. I couldn't tell if she'd been crying. Her eyes were as dark and inscrutable as a dust storm.

Her sleeves were rolled up, her meaty hands almost white with cleaning-chemical residue. The grip of the .45 was also dusted white. She must have been the one who retrieved the gun.

"Mrs. Pauerstein, you killed Alva," I said. "You followed her to the bar on Halloween night, watched her leave with the man in a yellow truck, trailed them to the Salado Inn. You stayed outside in your car all night, nursing your anger, trying to decide what to do. Then the man left, just before daylight. You went into his cottage and shot Alva Cruz in his bed."

Zuli stared at her employer. It was as if the maid had just noticed something horrible that had been under her nose for years—as if Mrs. Pauerstein were one of the doctor's photographs, a face that had been cut away from the muscle, stretched into a mask.

"Alva had threatened to make a scene," I said. "She demanded money, or she'd tell the town that she'd been your husband's lover since she was a minor. Maybe she could prove it, maybe she couldn't. But it wouldn't matter. It would hurt his image. More importantly, it would hurt yours. You wanted her dead. You'd probably wanted her dead for years—the family's dirty little secret."

"All right." Mrs. Pauerstein corrected her posture, directed a steely look straight at Zuli. "Well? He's right. I knew this man Alva slept with would be good to take the blame. After all, she only slept with brutes. That's why I insisted we hire Mr. Navarre. I

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wanted you to know she was dead. I wanted my *husband* to know she was dead. And I will not be arrested, Zuli. I will *not.*"

I wished things were different—that the girl was alive, that Dr. Pauerstein, the real asshole who had set this poison in motion, would be the one to get punished. Most of all, I wished I could poke a hole in Mrs. Pauerstein's sense of impunity, but I knew the kind of lawyers Dr. Pauerstein's money could buy. I knew the mileage they would get from the mangled crime scene, the two weeks that had passed, the criminal history of Frank Tejeda. It wouldn't matter what I said. Even the gun could be tested as inconclusive if you hired the right ballistics experts.

There were sirens in the distance—an ambulance, probably, coming this way.

"The wrong person," Zuli muttered. "*I* will go to jail."

"No," I told her. "You allowed him to use your daughter. You didn't have the courage to stand up to him. But you won't go to jail for that."

Zuli stared at the gun, which was much closer to her than it was to Mrs. Pauerstein. I knew what Zuli was thinking, and I didn't blame her, but I also sensed that she wouldn't act on her anger, at least not while I was there. I could feel her convictions the way you might feel the deep grain of a weathered oar, and I knew she would find it unseemly, disrespectful, to show such intimate hatred in front of a stranger. Mrs. Pauerstein seemed to know this, too.

"You don't understand what my maid is saying." Mrs. Pauerstein smiled at me, and for the first time I understood how completely this woman's soul had shattered. "After you called, Zuli took the gun from the kitchen drawer. She went upstairs, where my husband was working on his treadmill. He's dead, Mr. Navarre, shot through the heart. The police are on their way. Now—how much do I owe you for a good day's work?"

Later, I would read about the double murder. I would have time to lie awake, stare at the ceiling, and wonder about my choices. I would visit my neighborhood priest and confess, and I'd wonder if there was any satisfactory absolution this side of God.

But at that moment, in the Pauersteins' kitchen, I didn't hesitate.

Some conclusions cannot have an audience. They must be a silent dialogue between the two principals whose souls have been stripped like electrical wires.

From my pocket, I fished the rest of Dr. Pauerstein's cash. I threw the money on the table. "This one's on me."

I rose to leave, Mrs. Pauerstein's face falling as she realized her last hireling had just abandoned her.

Then I went outside to wait for the police, and heard the dry crack of gunfire behind me. ●

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The Thirteenth Card

by Stefanie Matteson

"When the wrong person uses the right means, the right means then have the wrong effect."—Chinese saying

Julie Smith took a seat opposite Robin Hathaway in the booth at Madame Zigana's Tarot Parlor. She was a young woman in her late twenties with big blue eyes, a long mane of light brown hair, and a peaches-and-cream complexion.

Robin passed the tarot deck across the green baize surface of the table.

Julie picked up the cards. "I'm not going to ask a question today," she said as she carefully shuffled the deck, her eyes half-closed in concentration. "I want a general reading." She opened her eyes. "Is that okay?"

"Fine," agreed Robin. "Is there something going on in your life I should know about?"

"Yes, there is," she replied evasively. Setting the shuffled deck down on the table in front of her, Julie cut it into three piles, dropping them one by one on the table to her left.

And she wanted Robin to tell her what it was. Fine—Robin had every faith in the cards to reveal what was going on, but the more information Julie shared with her, the more accurate and complete her reading would be.

She said as much to Julie as she picked up the cards.

"I know," she replied. "It's just that I'm not really sure if I'm right about this, and if I phrase my thoughts in the form of a question, it might influence the outcome." She leaned forward reassuringly. "You know I wouldn't ever test you."

Author of eight mystery novels starring sleuth Charlotte Graham, published in the 1990s by Berkley Prime Crime, Stefanie Matteson has devoted much of her writing time to short stories over the past few years. A resident of the Garden State, New Jersey, she has also been working recently on a new series of novels featuring a Chinese-American landscape architect. Ms. Matteson's new tale for us is more fanciful than her earlier stories. ¶

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It was true. Julie's faith in the ability of the cards to foretell the future was as steadfast as Robin's, if not more so.

The young woman was one of Robin's regulars. She came to Madame Zigana's every Thursday on her lunch hour. And she geared her life around the outcome: writing down the cards' recommendations in a journal dedicated to the purpose and following them to the letter. Sometimes her attitude gave Robin pause; she was *too* impressionable.

"Remember what you said two weeks ago about the pain my mother was having in her stomach—that it was nothing?" Julie said. "Well, you were right, as usual. She had an endoscopy on Monday; it was just a mild inflammation."

"I'm glad to hear that," Robin replied as she turned over the first card in Julie's reading. She was relieved because her readings were occasionally wrong, but only occasionally. And even then, hindsight usually showed that the cards had been right.

"We were all worried about stomach cancer, of course, especially after my uncle died of it," Julie went on. "But thanks to you, we were able to put those fears to rest." Her attention shifted to the cards, which Robin had finished laying out.

Julie's readings almost always had to do with trivial events: job issues, illnesses, family relationships. Something big rarely happened. And after three years, Robin was as familiar with the petty details of Julie's life as she was with those of her own family.

But today was different. Julie's readings usually contained few, if any, of the major arcana: the cards that indicated major changes. And although today's reading contained only one major arcana card, it was right at the heart of her reading: the Wheel of Fortune, signaling that events in Julie's life were about to take a turn.

The rest of the cards in the spread revealed the form that change would take: Julie was about to embark on a love affair. Robin was happy for her. Despite Julie's looks—she had that ripe, luscious kind of beauty that men adore—Julie had had bad luck with men. It was the same old story: They were all out for sex, while she wanted romance.

And it was romance that was now in the cards.

Julie was looking at her eagerly.

"You don't have to ask a question," said Robin. "It's all here." She waved her hand over the spread. "The Wheel of Fortune is at the center, indicating that your life is about to undergo a major change. And here's the agent of that change—the Page of Cups. He's announcing that you've met someone you're attracted to."

Julie was nodding. "Right on, so far."

"The emotional slump that you've been in is passing out of your life," Robin went on, "and the attraction you feel for this man is

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moving into it." She pointed to the card in the approaching-influence position, the Two of Cups. It showed a man and a woman gazing into each other's eyes over their loving cups with an almost palpable attraction.

Julie studied the cards, a small notebook in her hands. "Very interesting," she said as she carefully recorded what Robin had said in her journal.

"And here's the man himself—the King of Pentacles," Robin went on, pointing to a card that showed a distinguished man fondly contemplating the large coin he held in one hand. "An older man, successful in business, financially well-off." She looked up at Julie with a smile. "Way to go!" She continued, "It says here that you met him on the job."

Julie smiled knowingly.

"A sugar daddy?" Robin teased.

"Hopefully more than just that," said Julie, her pen poised. "What does it say?"

"Actually, it does show that the relationship will be more than that," Robin replied. She pointed to the card at the head of a column on the right: the Ace of Cups. "It says that you're going to fall in love. A new love relationship." She looked up at Julie with a smile. "No doubt about it: You're going to be head over heels."

"And it will be reciprocated?"

"Ah, the crucial question," said Robin, who by now was well into the spirit of the reading. "Here it is right here, in the hopes-and-fears position." She pointed to the Five of Cups. "You're afraid it's not going to work out. But don't worry," she reassured her. "It's going to be a love affair of major proportions."

Julie set down her notebook and leaned back with a sigh. She was grinning from ear to ear. "It's about time," she said. "I'm tired of being unlucky in love."

Robin turned back to the cards. "Now, what about this guy?" she asked. She looked up at Julie. "Let's find out some more about him. I know that *you* know all about him," she said, "but I want to know more."

Removing the King of Pentacles from the spread, she set it aside. Then she gathered up the rest of the cards and handed them back to Julie to reshuffle and cut. Once Julie had passed the cards back, she threw a second spread with the King of Pentacles at the center as the significator card, indicating the person about whom she was inquiring.

"The cards never cease to amaze me!" she exclaimed once she had finished throwing the spread. She looked up at her client. "He has almost exactly the same cards as you. Except that he's farther along. He's already in love with you. The Ace of Cups, which was your outcome card, is at the heart of his reading."

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Julie was looking very pleased.

"But," Robin continued, lifting a warning finger. "There are some problems." She looked up at her with concern. "He's married, isn't he?"

Julie nodded.

Robin showed her the High Priestess. "Here she is—the wife. She dominates the spread. She's a very powerful woman. They've been fighting a lot." She pointed to a card that showed men fighting with sticks. "But this is what concerns me," she went on. She picked up a card that showed people jumping out of a burning tower.

"The Tower," said Julie, reading the title on the card.

"Yes," Robin said, setting it down. "Right next to the High Priestess. Which means that she's going to make trouble." She pointed to a card showing a family gathered in front of a castle. "She doesn't want her home wrecked. You haven't slept with him yet, have you?" She looked up inquiringly. "The cards don't show that you have."

Julie shook her head.

"Well, if you do, I would advise the utmost discretion. If his wife finds out, it will be devastating. It won't be only the end of the affair, it will be the end of . . ." Her voice trailed off. She didn't like to make dire predictions; after all, the cards weren't infallible, though in her experience they were almost always right.

"I'll be careful," Julie said.

"Good," said Robin. One of her tarot teacher's favorite expressions had always been, "There are no accidents in the cards," which meant that although the throw of the cards might be random, their meaning was not.

"How did it go at Madame Zorro's today?" Ron asked over cocktails in the mahogany-paneled library. It was ten and he'd just gotten home. Few were the evenings when he got home on time anymore. During the week, he hardly saw their two teenaged sons, who were usually in bed by the time he got home, as they were this evening.

That's what he called Robin's business, "Madame Zorro's." He made it sound like a friendly joke, but it was really a thinly disguised form of ridicule. He hated her business. He thought it was unsuitable for an executive's wife to be telling fortunes. But it was more than just that. He also hated it because he didn't understand it.

Robin had started fooling around with the cards in the 'seventies. It had been the thing to do, along with smoking dope and stringing love beads. Her pastime had quickly turned into an obsession. In her daily readings, she had found that the cards offered amaz-

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ing insight into the depths of her unconscious, as well as the occasional uncannily accurate prediction. Now and then, she'd been coaxed into doing readings for friends, but that had been the extent of her ventures into fortunetelling—until an office cocktail party.

Her husband, who had been vice president of marketing at the time, had wanted a business-development theme. It was Robin, who also worked for the company, who came up with it: "See your future with Reliance Insurance." The guests were all business prospects; the gimmick was fortunetelling. Robin would do tarot readings, which, of course, would predict a successful business relationship with Reliance; others would do palm readings and crystal-ball gazing.

The party was a huge success. For three hours, Robin had sat at a card table and read fortunes. At the party's close, the company had a stack of new contracts and Robin had a new profession. She had discovered she had a natural talent for divination, which was more than she could say for insurance underwriting. Besides, a part-time career as a tarot reader would allow her to leave her full-time job, which she had wanted to do ever since their sons had been born.

By the end of the year, she had set up shop in a storefront in the small city near the suburban community in which they lived. She took the shop's name, "Madame Zigana's," from the Hungarian word for gypsy girl. A neon sign in the window proclaimed: "Reader, Advisor." She worked from nine to three, when her sons were in school. If she needed to take off to go on a class trip or attend a class play, she did. And although they didn't need the income, her work gave her money that wasn't under her husband's control.

And control—with him—was becoming more and more of an issue.

She was reminded of Julie's reading. Ron had once been Robin's King of Pentacles: a person of character and intelligence with natural leadership ability and a gift for making money. Now he was her King of Pentacles reversed: mean-spirited, spiteful, controlling.

It was called the male climacteric.

She answered Ron's question in the terms he understood. "Fifteen customers," she replied. "About average for a weekday."

"At fifteen bucks a shot, that's two hundred and twenty-five," Ron calculated. "Subtracting half for overhead, that leaves you with about a hundred and twelve." (Ron did their taxes.) "Times ten, it just covers the payment for your expensive new vehicle."

In other words, pin money. With Ron, it was always the bottom line. At least, that's the way it had been recently. If he couldn't

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control his mortality, he would try to control something else. Money.

And, she was beginning to suspect, something—or someone—else. . . .

Ignoring his put-down, she said, "I had my regular Thursday customer today." She never revealed the names of her customers, in keeping with the sign in her office that promised confidentiality. "It looks as if she's about to take a lover." She always tried to share the events of her day, however futile the effort might be.

"Oh, it does, does it?" he said, already engrossed in the newspaper.

After a moment, she changed the subject. "The church is holding its progressive dinner this weekend. I thought we might go. We had such a nice time last year."

He looked up at her over the rims of his reading glasses. "I can't," he said. "I'm going to be in Cincinnati for a conference." Catching her expression of disappointment, he added, "Maybe you can go with one of your friends. Or we could go out the following weekend for a nice dinner. How does that sound?"

She nodded in assent, but she was suspicious.

She was convinced he was having an affair. Unfaithfulness was one of the characteristics of the King of Pentacles reversed. And her readings for him had consistently turned up the Fool: the innocent who steps blithely into the unknown without regard for how his actions will affect others.

The prospect disappointed her, but it didn't make her mad. Her work with the cards had revealed the frailty of human nature. Indeed, it sometimes seemed as if the motives of her adult clients were as transparent as a child's. But if the cards exposed human weaknesses, they also showed how one could deal with them.

She glanced around her at the beautiful room, with the silver-framed photos of the boys displayed on the gleaming surface of the baby grand. According to the tarot, if she could get Ron over this one temptation, everything would be all right. Embracing husband and wife, dancing children, beautiful home—she had seen it in the cards.

Julie was right on time for her appointment the next Thursday. Robin was glad: She was eager to do her cards. It was exciting when events were unfolding in a client's life. She was reminded of those nineteenth-century novels that had been issued in weekly installments, and how their readers would mob the news agents for the latest issue.

But she didn't need to look at the cards to see what had happened in Julie's life. She was aglow. Had Robin been able to read auras, which was not one of her psychic abilities, she was sure Julie's would have been psychedelic. She was in love.

That's what her cards showed, too. The Lovers was at the center

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of the spread, while the card indicating a mere attraction had receded into the position for the recent past. "There you are," she said, pointing to the Lovers card. She looked up at Julie. "You did it, didn't you? You took the plunge."

She nodded with a happy, if somewhat embarrassed, smile.

Robin looked back at the cards. There was the wife again, crossing the Lovers. "Well, the wife's here, and she's about to find out, if she hasn't already. I warned you that you had to be careful," she chided. "You went away together," she continued, pointing to a card indicating a recent trip. "Did the wife find out about that?"

Julie shook her long mane of hair. "I don't see how she could have," she replied. "We were very discreet. We were both attending the same business conference. In Cincinnati."

"Cincinnati?" Robin repeated.

Julie nodded.

As the significance of what Julie had said sunk in, Robin felt the sensation of a physical blow to her midsection. No—it couldn't be, she told herself. When she had recovered her composure, she said casually, "I don't think you ever told me what line of business you're in. Though I know from the cards that it's financial services of some sort. Banking, investing . . ." she prompted.

"Insurance," Julie said. "We do underwriting on construction jobs."

It was true. Julie's King of Pentacles and her King of Pentacles were one and the same! "But you don't work for the same company as your lover."

"No," Julie said. "He's the director of marketing for one of our competitors. Actually, I met him at a business conference."

Ron was marketing director. "That's good," Robin said, carefully feeling her way. "There's less chance of the wife finding out if you work for different firms."

"Yes," Julie agreed, "especially since she used to work for the same company. She married the boss. Though she's a stay-at-home mom now."

Her suspicions had been right! Ron was having an affair, and the object of his affections was Julie Smith. She studied the young woman sitting across from her. An air of innocence, timidity, malleability. A flower child—that's how he viewed her, according to the spread, while she viewed herself as a little girl—*Daddy's* little girl.

Robin groaned inwardly with dismay. She was a made-to-order girlfriend for a middle-aged control freak in the midst of a midlife crisis.

Obviously, Ron hadn't told Julie about his wife's work. That wasn't surprising. He made no secret of his embarrassment that she worked at such a (in his eyes) disreputable occupation. "Have you told him about coming to see me?" she asked.

"No," Julie replied. "I have the feeling he wouldn't understand."

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At least she knew him pretty well, Robin thought. "I think you're right," she agreed. "Men like him are too left-brained to understand divination. They dismiss it as hocus-pocus." She looked up from the cards and smiled at Julie. "But we, on the other hand, know different. I would suggest that you not tell him. Now let's get back to the cards."

"Does it say anything about him leaving his wife?" Julie asked.

Robin looked up. "Why do you ask?"

"Because he said he was very unhappy and had been thinking about leaving her for some time. The implication was . . . " her voice trailed off.

Robin completed her sentence. "That he would marry you?"

Julie nodded.

"The cards show that you're entertaining a fantasy of marriage." She indicated the domestic Ten of Cups in the hopes-and-fears position. "But as for the reality . . . I don't know." She pointed to the Fool in the outcome position. "The outcome card is the Fool."

"Does that mean what I think it does?" Julie asked, anxiously biting her lip.

"Not necessarily. It means all the possibilities of adventure. A fresh choice is before you, but"—she raised an admonitory finger—"you have to choose wisely. The outcome is ambiguous: It could turn out well, or it could turn out disastrously." She pointed to the High Priestess on her throne. "You're up against a powerful adversary."

The barometer of Julie's emotions was on the downswing. Tears welled in her eyes. Rarely had Robin encountered such an impressionable client. She passed her a box of tissues that she kept on hand for such occasions.

It was at that moment that Robin conceived her plan. "Do you want to ask a question about marriage? We could do that," she offered.

"No," said Julie, blinking back her tears. "I think that would be premature. Maybe at some future time. Let's see what happens first."

By the time Julie returned to Madame Zigana's, Robin's plan had been polished to a work of beauty and elegance. The linchpin of her scheme was a second deck of cards, which she concealed on a recessed shelf she had installed under the table. During the week, she practiced switching decks until she was as adept as a magician pulling a card out of his sleeve. Though a reading depended largely on intuition, it was also based on the meaning and position of the individual cards, as well as on their relationships to one another. With a less experienced client, Robin could simply have manipulated the reading, but Julie was familiar enough with the

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cards that she could tell a good reading from a bad one. Which was why switching decks became necessary.

The succession of readings she planned for Julie would run over the course of six weeks. Six weeks was enough time for the first bloom of the affair to wear off, as well as enough time for a pattern of credibility to develop. Not that Julie didn't already have faith in the cards: She was among the most suggestible of Robin's clients. But Robin's scheme was designed to tweak that suggestibility, to turn Julie from a true believer into a pawn. It would now be Robin, not the hand of fate, who determined the lay of the cards.

Julie arrived promptly at noon on Thursday, fresh-faced and eager. Her reading for that week wasn't very significant: There were to be no major changes in her life, only the gradual development of her love affair.

"All these cups!" Robin exclaimed, studying the spread that lay on the table before her. "Love, happiness, emotions."

"That's good." Julie smiled.

"I see that you're spending several evenings a week with your lover," Robin went on. "You're meeting him at an apartment or a hotel room in a big city. Since the cards don't indicate that you've traveled outside of the area, I surmise it must be New York."

"Amazing!" Julie exclaimed as she made a notation in her journal. "It's an apartment, actually," she offered. "In lower Manhattan. His company maintains it for business guests. We've been meeting there several times a week, just as you said."

All of this Robin had already pieced together for herself and had arranged the second deck of cards, which she adroitly substituted for the one Julie had cut, accordingly.

"You're finding him an ardent lover," she said. "Eager to please you," (though this will change, she thought) "though perhaps not as capable a performer as a younger man."

Julie looked up and a blush crept up her long white neck.

Though he was her husband, Robin could have made the prediction even without personal experience: He was, after all, an out-of-shape executive in his mid fifties—not exactly a candidate for sexual athletics.

"The wife is still in the picture," Robin went on, "though she's in the background at the moment. Apparently, she hasn't found out yet."

"That's the only thing the cards have been wrong about," Julie said. "At least, I think they were wrong. He says she has no idea."

Little does he know, Robin thought. "Here's something nice," she said. She pointed with a smile to the Page of Cups. "He's going to send you a gift. I would guess it's flowers. Yes, roses," she said definitely. "Not just one, not just a dozen"—she threw out her arms in

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a gesture of expansiveness—"dozens of roses. Five or six dozen red roses."

Julie looked sceptical. "He's not the type," she said, quite accurately.

"Love can make people do things that are quite out of character."

"I suppose," Julie agreed reluctantly. She smiled her timid smile. "It would be nice if he did. Nobody's ever sent me flowers. My junior-prom date gave me a single rose, but nobody's ever sent me a bouquet. I've never gotten a love letter, either."

"Well, that's about to change. Look for your flowers within the next few days."

The flowers arrived at Julie's apartment on Sunday: six dozen red roses. She didn't even have enough vases for them, she later told Robin. She'd had to use her coffeepot for one bunch. They covered every available surface in her tiny living room. "It all came true exactly as you said," Julie had marveled. She had showed Robin the entry in her tarot journal. "You said five or six dozen red roses and it was six dozen."

The next week was the love letter. Though Robin had been an English major, it had been many years since she'd used her writing skills, and it took her a number of drafts before she got it right: just the requisite degree of mush. Not so much that it would be unbelievable coming from an undemonstrative King of Pentacles, or so little that it wouldn't have the desired impact.

"There's nothing in all the world I want but you—and your precious love. All the material things are nothing . . ." she wrote, cribbing shamelessly from Zelda's letters to F. Scott Fitzgerald, which she happened to have on her bookshelf. She wrote it on the computer. Thank God for the electronic age; at least she hadn't been called upon to forge Ron's handwriting. She knew he'd be too cowardly to disavow authorship.

The computer gave her another idea, which she used for week three: e-mail. Over the course of the week, she sent Julie several e-mails from Ron's computer at the office. She figured the password would be the same as for his e-mail at home, which it was. Ron was predictable—he was King of Pentacles, after all. Having once worked at the office, Robin wasn't an unusual visitor; only now she made sure to drop in only when he wasn't there.

The next week it was mash notes that she faxed from Ron's office. After that, it was sexy lingerie in the mail, and finally—for the finale on week six—the ring.

It looked more expensive than it was: a cubic-zirconium solitaire—very much like an engagement ring, in fact. Robin had always been a fan of cubic zirconium: Why pay for the real thing when the illusion was so effective?

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All of these events in Julie's life had been duly predicted in the cards.

Ron was tense and anxious over cocktails in the library that evening—the evening of the day Julie had received the ring. In fact, he'd been becoming increasingly tense and anxious over the last five weeks. He had mixed himself his usual martini, but, contrary to custom, it was nearly all gin. The set of his shoulders was stiff, his manner even more remote than usual. He sat in his leather wing chair in front of the fire. A silver tray of canapés rested on the coffee table.

The scene was set. "What is it, honey?" Robin asked solicitously as she passed him the tray. "Is everything all right at the office?"

"No, as a matter of fact," he growled, helping himself to crackers with caviar.

Ignoring his comment, she proceeded to fill him in on the trivia of her day as she waited for him to settle down and for the sedative effects of the martini to take hold. When it was clear that he was as relaxed as he was going to get, she asked: "Why don't you tell me what's going on, honey?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "It's not anything I want to get into. Let's just say that I think someone in the office is out to get me."

"That sounds a little paranoid, doesn't it?"

"You know the saying: 'Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean somebody isn't out to get you,'" he replied. "Someone's been sending letters and e-mails and—" He paused to consider his words. "—other things—in my name." He added: "They're sending them to someone who works for one of our competitors."

"Are these . . . things . . . that could get you into trouble?" she asked innocently.

"Of a sort, yes," he said, casting her a sidelong glance. "The sender has been setting me up for something I'm not sure I want to get involved in. At least, not yet and not to this extent. What baffles me is this person's motivation." He shook his head in perplexity. "Why is he pushing me into this course of action?"

She refrained from asking what the course of action was. "You're being very mysterious," she teased. "Never mind," she added with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Obviously, you're not in a position to tell me anything more."

He shot her a grateful look over the rim of his martini glass.

"I assume the course of action this person is setting you up for is not a wise one."

"Why do you say that?"

"If it were a wise one, it would mean this person wants you to succeed; if not, it would mean this person wants you to self-destruct. And," she added, "knowing the office as I do, I doubt it's the former. Who're your enemies?" she asked, knowing that Ron

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sat atop an ambitious heap of middle managers, all of whom envied him his job.

"As you know, they're legion," he replied with an ironic chuckle. "But what I don't understand is this: If this person is out to get me, why doesn't he expose this—" He groped again for a phrase that wouldn't be too revealing. "—ill-advised course of action that I've embarked upon. Why is he spurring me on?"

"Maybe he wants you to dig yourself in deeper?" she offered.

Ron was quiet. Robin could see the wheels turning. How would it look for him to leave his wife of twenty-seven years for a woman half his age, and one who worked for the competition, besides? Granted, insurance wasn't rocket science, but consorting with the competition wouldn't be taken lightly nonetheless.

"Or maybe he's" (Robin readily accepted her husband's choice of gender) "spurring you on as a way of helping you to recognize the folly of a course of action that might have been less apparent had it developed at a more gradual pace."

"A guardian angel who's pointing out the error of my ways?" he commented.

"Something like that," she replied. A guardian angel who didn't want to see him destroy the comfortable life it had taken him years to create, all on account of a simple lapse of judgment brought about by an infantile need to prove his virility.

Ron stared at the fire, sipping his drink thoughtfully. The pendulum was poised at the height of its arc; in a moment, if things went according to plan, it would start swinging back in the opposite direction—coming back home.

"How would Simon view this course of action?" she asked, knowing full well that the company's chief executive officer was a self-righteous prig who would take a dim view of any extramarital affair, much less one with a competitor.

"Not very well, I'm afraid," he said, finishing the last of his drink. Setting his glass down on the coffee table, he reached over for her hand and squeezed it. "Thanks," he said. "I think you're the one who's my guardian angel."

How right he was.

It was a principle of the cards—and of life itself—that, pushed to extremes, everything changes into its opposite. Thus, the libertine metamorphoses into the Holy Roller, the perfect child into the psychopathic killer, the steadfast employee into the swindler. And just so had all the good qualities of her husband—the sober King of Pentacles—turned under the pressure of earning a living, keeping his job, losing his youth—into their opposites: his reliability into unfaithfulness, his authority into arrogance, his talent with money into tightfistedness. It had been happening for years. His affair with Julie was

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the culmination of that process. But that didn't mean the pendulum couldn't swing back. All it needed was a little push to get it going.

And that's what Robin had provided.

She did an "other" reading for Ron that night, laying the spread out on the dining room table after he had gone to bed. It had been a long while since she'd done a reading for him—since before she found out about the affair, in fact. It wasn't out of lack of interest, but rather out of boredom: His cards were always the same. Until they revealed an impending affair, that was. But even that had fallen within the realm of her expectations. The King of Pentacles reversed was known for his casual infidelities. If it hadn't been Julie, it would have been someone else. Or so she had thought.

The cards that she turned over on the dining room table that night said otherwise.

As she laid them out on the black silk square she used for the purpose, her heart grew cold. There was more of the same: the sharp business practices, the tightness with money, the impulse to control, along with the recent addition of the infidelity. But the picture the cards now painted was of a serious romance, not a casual fling. Julie was the love of his life; it was as clear as day. His current reservations—the reservations that Robin had helped bring to the forefront of his attention—were there, but they were minor compared to the strength of his love. He was going to marry her; there was going to be a wedding. Robin and the boys would be cast off. They were there, but they were sitting squarely in his *past,* relegated to the sideline of his life. There would even be another child—with *her.*

Why hadn't she read Ron's cards sooner? She of all people should have checked up on what was going on. How could she have miscalculated so badly?

But it wasn't too late. The fate predicted by the cards wasn't immutable, as she well knew. It was merely a seed that could grow into an event. But in order for a seed to grow, it needed proper conditions: water and sunshine and fertile soil.

All of which were going to be denied.

It was the sixth week, the week that Robin had thought would be the last of her campaign. Now it was merely a way station somewhere in the middle. She had the luxury of time: that, Ron's cards had shown her. It would take him awhile to adjust to the idea of leaving his wife and perhaps his job, during which time she would have the opportunity to thwart the events that had been predicted in the cards. She was getting to be an old pro at deceit herself now, and her new scheme would be even more elegant than the last. It had to be—the stakes were greater.

The script for week six remained the same as originally planned; it was the next week that she would start turning up the

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heat. The cards were arranged in a predetermined order in the cubby. The card in the position for approaching influence was the Four of Cups, which showed a young man who is indifferent to the cup of love being offered him. The card in the position for the immediate future was the Six of Cups, which showed a man walking away from overturned cups, which signified rejected love. This was the card Julie had been so afraid of in her first reading about the affair. And the outcome card was the Three of Swords, which showed three swords piercing a giant red heart.

Julie burst into tears when Robin threw the outcome card.

"I think you already have a pretty good idea of the meaning of this spread," Robin said, trying to sound sympathetic. "As you can see, the Lovers has moved into the recent-past position." She pointed to the Five of Cups. "This card shows that your lover has become indifferent to you. He's going to walk away, if he hasn't already."

"He canceled our date for this weekend," Julie said. "He didn't give an explanation."

She looked up at Robin. "But why?" she wailed. "Everything was going so well. He even gave me a ring. Is it the wife? I don't see how she could have found out. Besides, he was planning to tell her anyway. I don't think it would matter now if she found out."

"No, it's not the wife," Robin replied. She was feeling the sense of elation that comes from having mastered a difficult task; she was at the top of her form.

"What then?" Julie asked.

"It's his job. The King of Pentacles is very materialistic. He's realized that in leaving his wife to marry you, he would be jeopardizing the position that he's worked so hard to achieve." She pointed to the Three of Swords. "He doesn't feel as if he has any alternative, even though he knows he's going to break your heart."

"But he knew he'd probably have to leave his job," Julie protested. "We already talked about that. He's ready to try something new. There are lots of opportunities out there for a man with his background." She went on, "He even said he didn't care about material things. It was in a letter: 'All the material things are nothing . . .' "

Robin arched a sceptical eyebrow.

" '. . . compared with our love.' "

Robin cut her off. Zelda clearly didn't have her husband's skill with words. "It's not just his job," she continued. "It's a whole lifestyle: the house, the country club, the Caribbean vacations—none of which he'd be able to afford if he has to divide his assets with his wife. Believe me, this is not a man who's going to move with you to New England to run a B and B, no matter what he might have said in a love letter."

Julie stared at her in shock and disbelief.

Looking up, Robin sliced a finger across her neck. "Three weeks

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and you're history."

There was silence for a few minutes. Then Julie spoke: "I thought it was going to be different this time." Her voice was barely above a whisper, her tone despondent. She started sobbing—deep, lurching sobs.

"Much as I hate to say it, there are no accidents," Robin told her. It was a phrase she had used often—one whose meaning Julie knew very well.

Robin passed her the box of tissues.

Phase II went into effect the next week. Robin called it her Gaslight campaign, after the old movie with Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer. Its aim was nothing less than the destruction of the Tower, which had been the outcome card in Julie's initial reading about the affair. The heartbreak remained. There was depression and loneliness. The central card was the Nine of Swords, which showed a woman sitting up in bed, crying. "It depicts the dark night of the soul," she told Julie. And there was worse to come: Julie would have a car accident by the time the week was out. Nothing serious: a fender bender. But expensive to fix. Robin had no trouble arranging this in the parking lot at the strip mall out on the highway. Especially with her new SUV, which grossly outweighed Julie's compact. She simply backed into the door while Julie was in the drugstore, crumpling it like a piece of cardboard. Nobody was around to notice; Robin had made certain of that.

The stolen pocketbook, which was to be the next week's woe, took a little more finesse to pull off. Robin didn't want to be arrested for purse snatching. But Julie turned out to be even more careless than Robin had thought, which might have been due to her state of mind. After removing her money, credit cards, and driver's license in order to maximize the hassle factor, she tossed the purse into the nearest mailbox. The third week was the hate letters, crazy and illiterate, which Robin constructed out of letters and words that she clipped from newspapers and magazines, like the letters sent by the psychopathic creeps in suspense thrillers.

By the fourth week, Julie was primed for disaster. Although Robin may have recognized that the future predicted in the cards wasn't fixed, Julie had no such notion. Especially after her love affair—every detail of which had been spelled out in the cards—and the events of the last few weeks. She arrived for her session in a state of extreme agitation. She was pale and jumpy; she appeared to have lost weight.

"C'mon," said Robin blithely after Julie had confided her apprehensions. "What else could go wrong?" (Little did she know.) "Besides, don't you know that bad luck comes in threes? You've just had a run of it, that's all."

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After Julie had carefully shuffled and cut the cards, Robin proceeded to lay them out. The spread wasn't coming out well at all. Swords—the suit of strife and misfortune—were everywhere; there were lots of reversed cards, too, which generally weren't a good sign.

"You're going to fall ill soon," Robin said as she threw the card for approaching influence. "It's going to be a serious illness involving your heart," she added as she turned over the card representing the immediate future.

"But how could that be?" Julie cried. "I'm only twenty-seven."

Robin shrugged as if to say, *There are no accidents.*

Julie thought for a moment, and then added, "As a matter of fact, I haven't been feeling well lately. I have this sensation that my heart is beating too rapidly." She raised her palm to her chest. "It feels like a bird beating its wings."

Robin nodded knowingly. "Maybe you should see a doctor," she suggested as she turned over the card for how others viewed the subject. It was as frail and vulnerable, which confirmed how Julie was feeling about herself. Then came the card for her hopes, which were for a renewal of love. Finally, there was the outcome card.

Julie watched intently as Robin turned the card over. It was the thirteenth card of the major arcana: the Death card. A menacing skeleton armed with a scythe cleared the ground around him, in which were scattered the heads and hands of his victims.

"Death," Julie whispered. Her eyes bulged and a sweat broke out on the fine, youthful skin of her temples.

"The final outcome," Robin said solemnly. The divinatory meaning of the Death card was rarely physical death; it was too limiting. It was usually transformation or renewal: getting rid of the old in order to make room for the new. Death was something that was always happening in life; we die to the present so that the future can unfold.

It was the tarot reader's responsibility never to predict physical death because of the likelihood that the card represented one of these less tragic interpretations. But there were circumstances in which the thirteenth card had a literal meaning.

And this was one of them.

"There are no accidents?" Julie asked softly, in hopes of being contradicted. Her voice was the merest whisper.

Robin shook her head.

She died the next week. A heart attack. An unusual occurrence in a young woman of her age, but not unheard of. A coronary embolism. Probably from the birth-control pills she'd been taking. A side effect that was rare, but occurred nevertheless. Ron went to the memorial service. "A young woman I knew from work," was how he described her. She'd been depressed, he said—an unhappy love affair.

Robin wasn't surprised. She'd seen it in the cards. ●

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Three Happy Widows
by Julie F. Crary

Three widows sat and sipped champagne, a taste of freedom once again.
The last man dead, their plans complete, the taste of vict'ry oh so sweet.
They'd spent long hours on their plan: the perfect murder of a man.
A foolproof plan was what they sought, without a chance of getting caught.
They'd talked about a hired gun, but that would cost them all a ton.
And then there was no guarantee that he'd stay mum and they'd stay free.
The next plan looked like suicide, then followed thief and cyanide.
"Aha!!" at last one lady cried, "I know a plan that's not been tried."
So back they'd gone to their own homes, their kitchen sinks and cleaning foams.
Three better wives there never were, to wait upon each thankless cur.
The first wife was a wondrous cook, the greatest care is what she took.
To serve up all his meals in bed, a big fried steak and homemade bread.
She did the chores and let him be, while he ate snacks and watched TV.
The husband of the second wife enjoyed an even better life.
"You rest," she'd whisper in his ear, "sit back, relax, and have a beer.
Feel free to go out with your friends, and stay until the last call ends."
Husband number three, it seems, just couldn't give up nicotine.
It didn't matter—chew, cigars, or cigarettes with all that tar.
She took this habit in her stride, and all she said was, "Smoke outside."
Now husband number one has died; with racking sobs, his good wife cried.
"Oh what a pity," neighbors said, "a heart attack, and now he's dead.
It seems that his cholesterol completely plugged his right heart wall."
The second husband followed suit, the reason why they'd not refute.
"A pickled liver," people heard, "cirrhosis" the official word.
Devoted wife that she had been, she looked depressed, red-eyed and thin.
Now cancer's caused the third man's death; he had to fight to get his breath.
The oxygen had been routine, his lungs destroyed by nicotine.
His widow pale, her lips compressed, from head to toe in black she dressed.
Three widows sat and sipped champagne, a taste of freedom once again.
Cholesterol, tobacco, booze. A brilliant plan; they could not lose.
"There's nothing anyone can say; we knocked them off the legal way."

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

The Cherub Affair

by Peter Robinson

1.

Dazzling sunlight spun off the glass door of Angelo's when I pulled it open and walked in at eleven that morning, as usual.

"Morning, Mr. Lang," said Angelo. "What'll it be?"

"I'll have a cup of your finest java and one of those iffy-looking crullers, please."

"Iffy-looking! All our donuts are fresh this morning."

"Sure, Angelo. I'll take one anyway. How's business?"

"Can't complain."

"Watch the game last night?"

"Uh-huh."

"Don't tell me, they lost again, right?"

"Uh-huh."

Angelo is a diehard Blue Jays fan. He gets depressed when they lose. He's been depressed a lot this summer.

Angelo looked over my shoulder, out to the street. "Hey, wonders never cease," he said. "Looks like you've got a customer."

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"Client, Angelo, client. You get customers. I get clients."

"Whatever. Anyways, this one you'll want to see." He whistled lasciviously and sculpted an impossibly voluptuous shape in the air with his hands.

Curious, I took a plastic lid for my coffee and, juggling the cruller in my other hand, tried to make a dignified exit. Could this be it, after all this time? The legendary beautiful blonde of private-eye fiction come to life at last. In *my* office?

I took the stairs two at a time and saw her standing there in the hallway, about to knock on my door. She turned, and I could see an expression of distaste on her face. I couldn't blame her. She was Holt Renfrew from head to toe, and the place doesn't get cleaned often. Under the dim glow of a bare sixty-watt bulb, the old linoleum was cracked and veined with years of ground-in dirt.

Angelo's mimed shape hadn't been far wrong, if a tad over-generous. She was certainly beautiful, but there was something else. I knew her. Damned if I could remember from where, but I knew her.

She smiled and held out her hand. "Mr. Lang. It's nice to see you again."

I gestured her into the office, where she brushed crumbs off the chair with her white-gloved hand before sitting down, crossing her legs, and turning her nose up at the view. It's not great, I know, but it's cheap. We're in a strip mall on the Scarborough side of Kingston Road, opposite one of those clapboard hotels where the government houses refugee claimants. I parked my coffee and cruller on the cluttered desk and sat down. Now I knew where I recognized her from, but the name still wouldn't come.

She peeled her gloves off and gave me another smile. "Susan," she said, as if sensing my embarrassment. "Susan Caldwell."

"Of course," I said. "Nice to see you again, Susan."

Susan Caldwell. She had been one of my students ten years ago, in another life, when I was a teaching assistant at the University of Toronto. Now I remembered. Susan had been notable mostly for her long blond hair and a rather ill-advised essay on Darwin's influence on Wordsworth's thought. The blond hair was still there,

Best known for his award-winning Yorkshire police series starring Inspector Banks, Peter Robinson is also the author of non-series books and a score of short stories. His stories have claimed several awards, including the Macavity, the CWA's Short Story Dagger, and 2001's Edgar for Best Short Story (for "Missing in Action" from *EQMM*). Mr. Robinson's latest Banks novel is *Close to Home*. This new tale introduces a Toronto P.I. ¶

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along with the dark blue eyes, button nose, long, shapely legs, and a nice curve at the hips. Impure thoughts passed through my mind, but she was only about five years younger than me, and she wasn't my student anymore.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"I need help."

"Why choose me?" Nobody else ever does, I might have added, but didn't.

"I remembered that article about you in the paper awhile back."

Ah, yes, the famous article. When I couldn't find an academic position after getting my Ph.D. in English, I followed my adolescent fantasy, fueled by years of Hammett and Chandler, and enrolled in a private investigator's course. I got the qualification, served my apprenticeship with a large firm, and now I was out on my own. LANG INVESTIGATIONS. It had a ring to it. Anyway, the newspaper had done a feature on me, labeled me "The Ph.D. P.I.," and it sort of stuck. Embarrassing, but it brought in a curious client or two, and now here was the lovely Susan Caldwell sitting opposite me.

"People who need me are usually in trouble," I said.

"It's not me. It's my brother."

"What's the problem?"

"He's been arrested."

"What for?"

"Murder." She leaned forward and rested her hands on the desk, so bound up in her plea for her brother that she didn't even notice the dust. "But he didn't do it, Mr. Lang. I *know* my brother. He wouldn't harm a fly."

Now that she mentioned it, I did remember hearing something about the case. I don't usually pay a lot of attention to true-crime stories, especially when they involve celebrities, but sometimes you can't avoid picking up a few details, especially if it's close to home. "Tony Caldwell, right?" I said. "The famous fashion photographer. He's accused of murdering his wife."

"Yes. But he didn't do it."

"Ms. Caldwell, Susan," I said, "I don't usually investigate murders. The police don't like it, for a start, and I try to stay on good terms with them."

"The police." She spat out the word as if it were a cockroach. "Don't talk to me about the police! They've just decided Tony's guilty and that's that. They're not even looking for the real killer."

"They must have a good reason," I said.

"Well, maybe they *think* they have a good reason, but they don't know Tony like I do."

"What could I do that the police can't?"

She looked me in the eye. "You could believe me, for a start," she

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said. "Then maybe you could talk to him. At least you could keep an open mind."

She had a point there. There's nothing the police like more than an open-and-shut case; it's neat, like balancing the books, and it makes the statistics look good. And most cases *are* open-and-shut. Why should Tony Caldwell's be so different? Because his sister said so? If I killed someone, I'd hope that *my* sister would refuse to believe it, too, and defend me just the way Susan was defending Tony. Still, I was tempted to give it a try.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"He's staying with me. He just came out on bail. Our parents live in Sarnia, and Tony's not supposed to leave Toronto."

"Give me the details," I said.

Susan sat back in her chair and spoke softly. "It was about one o'clock in the morning. Tony and Val—that's Valerie Pascale, his wife—had been out, and they just got home."

"Where do they live?"

"The Beaches. Or Beach. I never know which."

"Either's fine with me. Go on."

"The neighbors said they heard them arguing loudly. Then, after it had been quiet for a while, Tony called the police and said his wife was dead."

"Is that exactly what he said?"

"On the phone, yes, but when they came, before they warned him or whatever they do, they say he said, 'I didn't mean it. I'm sorry, Val.'"

That didn't sound good. "Did they argue often?"

"They loved each other very much, but it was a pretty volatile relationship. Valerie grew up in Vancouver, but she was half French," Susan added, as if that explained it all.

"Did Tony explain what he meant by the comment?"

"He said that he was apologising for the argument, that he was sorry the last words they'd had together were angry, and that he'd never have a chance to make up."

"Did he say anything else?"

"He admitted they'd had a quarrel, and said he stormed off upstairs. I know this might sound odd, Mr. Lang, but he had a shower. If you knew Tony, you'd know he's a compulsive showerer, and he always does it when he gets upset. Ever since he was a kid. When he went downstairs about twenty minutes later, he found Valerie dead in the living room, stabbed. He says he doesn't remember much after that."

"You say she was stabbed. What about the knife? Did the police find it? Were Tony's fingerprints on it?"

"It was just a kitchen knife, I think. He said he'd been using it earlier to cut the string on a parcel."

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"So his prints *were* on it?"

"Only because he'd been using it to cut the string."

Again, it wasn't looking good. "Did he confess?"

"No. Of course not."

"Was there any other reason the police charged him so quickly, then?" I asked, almost dreading the answer.

"Well," said Susan, shifting uneasily in her chair. "I suppose so . . . I mean, you know, when they got there . . . it *might* have looked bad."

"Yes?"

"Well, when the police arrived, Tony was kneeling beside her body holding the knife, and he was covered in blood. Valerie's blood."

2.

The police refused to talk to me and warned me off the case, as expected, so I decided to have a word with the accused next. Susan Caldwell lived in a two-bedroom apartment in the Yonge and Eglinton area, or "Young and Eligible," as it was known locally because of the hordes of singles who filled the apartment buildings and frequented the restaurants, bars, and clubs every night. Susan was waiting when I arrived, and without further ado she showed me into her brother's room.

Tony Caldwell lay sprawled on his bed reading a photographic magazine. He looked more Queen Street West than East in a white T-shirt with Japanese characters scrawled in red across the front, black jeans, hollow cheeks, and gelled, spiky blond hair. Handsome if you liked that sort of look, effeminate if you didn't. I didn't care either way.

I introduced myself, and he gestured me to a hard-backed chair by the window. We were on the twelfth floor, and below I could see lunchtime swarms of office workers hitting the trendy Yonge Street bistros and trattorias.

"I really didn't do it, you know," Tony said. "It happened exactly the way I told the police."

"Tell me about that evening. Who was there? What were you doing?"

Tony propped himself up on a cushion. "Val and me, Jacqui Prior, my business partner Ray Dasgupta, and Scott Schneider and his wife Ginny. We were supposed to be celebrating. Jacqui had just been chosen as the new Cherub girl. It's a whole range of soaps, bath oils, shampoos, and stuff due to be launched next year. Major multinational campaign. Anyway, Jacqui was the face, the look, and our studio got the contract for the still photography, so we all had a lot to celebrate. Scott is Jacqui's agent, so he and Ginny were over the moon, too. You've no idea what a boost that

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will give Jacqui's career—not that she's done badly so far, but it's a whole new ballgame for her. For all of us, in fact. It's like we've all suddenly moved into the big time."

"When did things start to go wrong?"

"Just before the cappuccino. We'd had quite a bit to drink, and Val had been moody all evening. Finally, she hit us with the news. When everyone got around to toasting Jacqui for the fiftieth time, Val said something about her face not being so photogenic if she didn't keep her hands off me. You can imagine how that heated things up."

"Was it true? About the affair?"

"I'm not proud of it, but I won't deny it."

"How did Valerie find out?"

"I don't know. I thought we were discreet."

"Could someone have told her?"

"I suppose so, but I can't imagine who. I didn't think anyone else knew."

"What happened next?"

"Well, there was a very embarrassing scene in the restaurant, and Jacqui had to take Val to the washroom to quiet her down."

"Didn't that surprise you, Jacqui and Val going off together after what had just happened?"

"I never looked at it that way. They'd been best friends for an awful long time. But Val was a lot calmer when she came back, and Jacqui left almost immediately with Scott and Ginny. Val and I stayed a bit longer with Ray, drank some more, but it was obvious the party was over. We started arguing again in the cab on the way home. When we got there, the fight went on. I tried to calm things down, but Val was really wild. She's always been extremely jealous. Anyway, I was looking for a distraction, and I remembered there was a package of books I wanted to open. Modern first editions. I hadn't had time in the morning. I got a kitchen knife to cut the string, then Val started on at me again for being more interested in the books than in what she had to say, which, to be honest, was nothing really but a string of insults aimed at me. That was when I threw the knife down and went for a shower—they always seem to calm me down—and when I came back she was dead. That's all there is to it."

"You didn't hear anything?"

"Nothing at all. The shower's pretty loud."

"Could someone have got in the house while you were showering?"

"I don't see how. The front door was locked and bolted, with the chain on."

"And the back?"

"The door was open because it was a warm evening, and we get

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a nice breeze from the lake, up the ravine, but the screen door was locked. I know because the police kept going on about it when they were trying to get me to confess. They kept telling me how it couldn't have been anyone else, that there were no signs of a break-in."

"How long had you been seeing Jacqui?"

"Only a couple of months."

"Was it serious?"

"I don't know." Tony sighed, running long, bony fingers through his hair. "She's a hard one to fathom. I thought I was serious, but maybe I was just infatuated. Jacqui's a fascinating woman, complicated, very difficult to get to know."

"You say she and Val were old friends?"

"Yes. Had been since high school. They both went into modeling, out in Vancouver first, then they came to Toronto about five years ago. That was what hurt Val most—that it was her closest friend. It wasn't so much that I'd been with another woman, though that would have been bad enough, but that I'd been with Jacqui. We'd always flirted a bit in public, you know, just in fun. But one time we were alone and things just got out of hand."

"Can you think of anyone else who might have had a reason to hurt Valerie?"

"So you *do* believe me?"

I remembered Susan's plea. "I'm keeping an open mind."

Tony thought for a moment. "No," he said. "Since Val gave up modeling, she's been doing a bit of teaching at the agency. Deportment, public speaking, that sort of thing. She gets along well with everyone."

"Did she have any lovers?"

"Not that I knew of, and I'm pretty sure I would have known."

"Okay," I said, getting up to leave. "Thanks a lot, Tony. If anything comes up, I'll be in touch right away."

Tony seemed surprised and alarmed that I was leaving so soon. He sat up abruptly and crossed his long legs. "You are going to help me, aren't you? You do believe me?"

"What I believe doesn't really matter," I said. "It's what I can get the police to believe that counts. But don't worry, I'll do my best. One more thing: Do you think I could have the house keys? It would help if you'd write down the address, too. I'd like to have a look around."

"Sure. You can take Valerie's set," he said. "I picked them up last time I was over there, after the police let me out. I couldn't stand to stay in the house, not after what happened, but I didn't like the idea of them just lying around like that."

I took the ring of keys. A Mickey Mouse key chain. Cute. "Do you know what all these are for?" I asked.

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Tony started counting them off. "Front door, back door, studio, agency. That one I don't know."

There was one key left, but it didn't look like a door key to me. Too small. I thought I had a pretty good idea what it was.

"Did Valerie keep a safety-deposit box?" I asked Tony.

He seemed surprised by the question. "Not that I know of. Why?"

I held up the key. "That's why," I said.

3.

I wanted to find out where the safety-deposit box was located and what its contents were, but I didn't know whether I'd be able to get into it even if I found it. Technically, Tony would inherit everything of Valerie's, unless her will specified otherwise, but criminals aren't permitted to gain financially from their crimes. On the other hand, Tony hadn't been convicted of anything yet. Something to talk to a lawyer about. In the meantime, I had asked Tony to check with Valerie's bank, and there was plenty of digging around for me to do.

The Caldwell house looked like a cosy English vicarage right out of *Masterpiece Theatre*. I parked my 1998 Neon across the street among the BMWs and Audis, and, feeling vaguely ashamed of its unwashed state and the dent in the front right wheel arch, I walked up to the door.

Outside the house stood a huge old oak tree, and I wondered if it would provide an intruder enough cover from the nosy neighbors. Even so, anyone who wanted to get in would have to get past the heavy door, which Tony told me had been locked, bolted, and chained. There was no porch, just the dark, paneled door set in the sandy stonework. The key let me into a small hallway, and a second door led into the living room. The police had taken the carpet, leaving the polished wood floor bare.

Three of Tony's photographs hung on the wall. They were very good, as far as I could tell. I'd expected modernistic effects and cut-up contact sheets, but two of the three were landscapes. One looked like a Beach sunset, showing the Leuty lifeguard station in effective, high-contrast black-and-white, and the other was a view of a rocky coastline, probably in Nova Scotia, where the cliff edges cut the land from the sea like a deformed spine. Again, Tony had used high contrast.

The third was a portrait signed by Valerie, along with what I took to be her lip prints, dated two years ago. She was posing against a wall, just head and shoulders, but there was such sensuality about her Bardot-like pout and the way her raven's-wing hair spilled over her bare, white shoulders. There was something about the angle of her head that seemed to challenge and invite at the same time, and the look in her dark eyes was intelligent,

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humorous, and questioning. For the first time in the case, I had a real sense of the victim, and I felt the tragedy and waste of her death.

Upstairs, I rummaged through her bedside drawers and checked out the walk-in closet, but found nothing I didn't expect to. I assumed the police had already been through the place before me and taken anything they thought might be related to the crime. On the other hand, if they believed they had caught the criminal and had enough evidence against him, then they wouldn't go to the expense of an all-out, lengthy crime-scene investigation. Not exactly *CSI;* they'd leave their lasers and Luminol at home. Valerie's clothes were high-quality designer brands, her underwear black and silky. I felt like a voyeur, so I went back downstairs.

Next I moved into the kitchen, where the parcel of books still lay on the table, brown paper and string loose around it. The books, first editions of early Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro, were from an antiquarian dealer in Halifax, I noticed, and the string was a quaint, old-fashioned touch. The only thing missing was the knife itself, which the police had taken as evidence.

The door opened onto a back stoop, and my intrusion scared off a flock of red-throated house finches from the bird feeder. Judging by the untidy lawn surrounded by its flagstone path, neither Tony nor Valerie had been very interested in gardening. At the far end, the lawn petered off into bracken and roots where the ravine threatened to encroach, and finally the land dropped away. I walked to the end of the garden and noticed that the ravine was neither too steep nor too overgrown to be inaccessible. There was even a path, narrow and overgrown, but a path nonetheless. You certainly wouldn't have had to be a mountain lion to gain easy access from the back.

The ground had been hard and dry at the time of the murder, I remembered, and we'd had a couple of heavy storms in the last week, so there was no point in getting down on my hands and knees with a magnifying glass, even if I had one. I stood at the end of the lawn for a while enjoying the smell of the trees and wild flowers, listening to the cardinal's repetitive whistling and the *chip-chip* sounds of warblers, then I went back inside.

Fine. Now I knew that it was possible for someone to get up and down the ravine easily enough. But how about getting into the house? I sat at the kitchen table toying with the string. I could think of no way of getting through a locked screen door without leaving a trace, unless it were either open in the first place, or somebody had opened it for me. Valerie might have opened it to someone she knew, someone she felt she had no reason to fear. If she were distracted by her anger at Tony, her surprise at seeing a

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friend appear at the back door would surely have overruled any caution or suspicion she might otherwise have felt. On the other hand, if the door was locked when the police arrived, that was a problem.

As I sat twirling the string around my fingers and idly glancing at the two first editions in their nest of brown paper, I became aware of a niggling discrepancy. It was unconscious at first, nothing I could put my finger on, but as it turned out, it was *on* my finger. I unraveled the string and tried to fasten it around the books. It didn't fit. Much too short. I looked around on the floor but saw no more, and I could think of no reason why either Tony or the police would secrete a length of string.

I went over to the screen door and examined the catch, which looked like an upside-down earlobe, and surely enough, when I looked closely, I noticed scuff marks around the narrow neck. Making sure I had the house keys in my pocket, as an experiment I opened the door, hooked a length of string over the catch, then shut the door, standing outside, holding the string. When I tugged gently, the catch engaged and the screen door locked. I let go of one end and pulled the string towards me. It came free.

I still had nothing concrete, no real evidence, but I did have the solution to a very important problem. If Valerie *had* let someone in through the back, whoever it was could easily have killed her, left the same way, and locked the screen door from outside. Now I knew that it *could* be done.

4.

Jacqui Prior, my next port of call, lived in an apartment off The Esplanade, close to the St. Lawrence Market, the Hummingbird Centre, and all the wine bars and restaurants that had sprung up around there. I found her in torn jeans and a dirty T-shirt, lustrous dark hair tied back in a ponytail, busily packing her belongings into boxes she had clearly picked up from the local LCBO store. While she seemed surprised to see me, she was also curious. She said she was just about to take a break anyway and offered me a cup of Earl Grey, which I gladly accepted.

There was a superficial resemblance to the photograph of Valerie Pascale I had seen at Tony Caldwell's house, but Jacqui seemed somehow unformed, incomplete. She had the kind of face that was beautiful but lacked personality. I imagined that was probably what made her a good model. She must be the kind of person who would shine and sparkle in front of the camera, given a role to play. Her olive skin was smooth as silk, perfect for beauty soap, shampoo, and bath oil commercials, and I could imagine her looking wholesome in a way that Valerie Pascale didn't.

"Where are you moving to?" I asked.

"I've found the perfect little house in Leaside."

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"Leaside? Won't that be a bit quiet for you after all this?"

She smiled, showing perfect dimples. "I like things quiet. I need my beauty sleep."

There wasn't much I could say to that, so I sipped some Earl Grey.

Jacqui frowned. It could have been real, or it could have been a model's frown. I didn't know. "It's awful about Valerie and Tony," she said. "I feel terribly responsible in a way, but I don't see how I can help you."

"It's not your fault," I said. "People do what they do. I'm just not convinced that Tony Caldwell did what he's been accused of."

"Oh? What makes you think that?"

"Just a few inconsistencies, that's all. You and Valerie were old friends. How did you meet?"

"We were at high school together, then we both went to UBC. We shared an apartment in Kitsilano."

"So you knew her pretty well?"

"As well as one could know Valerie."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She wasn't exactly an open book, you know."

"She had secrets?"

"We all have secrets. Valerie could make the most innocent thing into a secret. It was her nature to be mysterious, enigmatic. And she liked to be in control, liked to have the upper hand. She needed to feel that, ultimately, if the walls came tumbling down, she'd be safe, she'd have an escape route."

"Didn't work this time," I said.

Jacqui wiped away a tear. "No."

"Who told her about your affair with her husband?"

Jacqui looked shocked, and I was beginning to feel more and more that I was being treated to her repertoire of faces. She was good. "Do we have to talk about that?"

"I'm trying to help Tony."

"Yes. Yes, of course. I'm sorry. I don't know how she found out. I'm sure nobody knew about us."

"What happened when the two of you went to the washroom?"

"Nothing. We just talked it out, that's all. Sort of made up."

"Sort of?"

"I told her I'd end it with Tony. She was still upset, but she accepted my word."

"Would finishing with Tony have been difficult for you?"

"A little, perhaps. But it's not as if we were in love or anything."

"So it was just an affair? A fling?"

"Yes. Oh, don't sound so disapproving. We're both adults. And it's not as if I was the first."

"Tony had other affairs?"

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"Of course."

"Did Valerie know?"

"She never said anything to me."

"Are you sure you don't plan to go on seeing Tony now that Valerie is conveniently out of the way?"

"I don't like what you're implying. I've lost a very good friend. There's nothing 'convenient' about that."

"A good friend whose husband you stole."

"I didn't steal him. Don't be so melodramatic. These things happen all the time."

"Where did you go after you left the restaurant that night, Jacqui?"

"I came here. Scott and Ginny dropped me off. They'll tell you."

"Did you visit Tony and Valerie's house often?"

"Sometimes."

"When was the last time?"

"About a month ago. They had a barbeque. We were all there. Me, Ray, Ginny, Scott."

"So you knew the ravine well enough?"

"We all went for a walk there, yes, but look—"

"And you had plenty of time to get back out to the Beach the night Valerie was killed, if you wanted to."

"I don't drive."

"There are taxis."

"They'd have records."

"Maybe. But Valerie would have let you in the back door, no problem, wouldn't she?"

"What are you talking about? Why should I go to the back door?"

"So you wouldn't be seen from the street. Because you went with the intent of killing Valerie. You just didn't know that Tony would get the blame. When you found out he was in the shower and Valerie was alone, you seized the opportunity and killed her."

Jacqui stood up, hands on hips. "This is ridiculous. On the one hand you're saying I went there with the intention of killing Valerie, which is absurd, and on the other hand you accuse me of seizing the moment. Which is it? It can't be both. Look, I don't want to talk to you anymore. You're not a real policeman. You can't make me."

She was right. I had no special powers. Standing, I reached in my pocket for the key. "Recognize this?" I asked.

She looked at it, pouting. "No."

"It's a safety-deposit key," I told her. "Were you ever aware of Valerie having a safety-deposit box?"

"No. But I told you she could be very secretive."

"Any idea what she might have kept in it if she had one?"

"I don't know. Money? Now, if you don't mind, I've got more packing to do."

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Jacqui's response to the whole safety-deposit-box issue was just a bit too rushed and casual for my liking. I followed her to the door trying to decide whether I believed her or not. I wasn't sure. The problem was that Jacqui Prior wasn't a WYSIWYG sort of woman. Tony Caldwell had called her complicated, but in a way she struck me as shallow, empty without the role to assume, the correct expression to wear or gesture to make. As I rode the elevator down to my car, I found myself wondering if I was being manipulated. Just how much did Jacqui and Tony's affair have to do with what happened to Valerie? In my mind's eye, I saw myself as Charles Laughton riding his stairlift in *Witness for the Prosecution.* Had they planned it between the two of them, I wondered, and was my getting Tony off part of their plan? Was I being used in their game?

If Tony Caldwell or Jacqui Prior hadn't murdered Valerie, then who else might have done it? Discounting the passing-tramp theory, my money was still on one of the dinner guests: Jacqui, Ray Dasgupta, Scott and Ginny Schneider. Valerie would have let any one of those four in the back door. But which one? And why? And what part did the safety-deposit box play? Maybe I would find out something from the others who'd been at dinner that night.

5.

I found both Scott and Ginny Schneider in the office of their modeling agency just off Spadina, in the garment district. On the surface, Scott seemed very much the outgoing, charming type, while Ginny was more reserved. They were both in their late thirties, and I'd guess from her cheekbones that Ginny had probably been a model herself in the not-too-distant past. Her husband looked more like a trendy stockbroker in casual business attire.

"I thought the police had settled the matter of Valerie's death," Scott said.

"They've arrested Tony Caldwell, if that's what you mean," I said. "But that doesn't settle anything."

"How so?"

"I'm just not convinced. I understand Valerie worked for you?"

"She helped out sometimes, yes. She'd been a model herself, and quite a good one, too, so she was able to work with some of the girls and with the clients, help us with our selections. It's an important part of the business, and it can be very tricky, matching the model to the product."

"Was anything bothering her around the time of her death?"

"Her husband's affair with Jacqui Prior, I should imagine."

"Did she talk to you about that?"

"No. We only found out at the dinner, along with everyone else."

"You, too?" I asked Ginny.

"Yes."

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"And were you surprised?"

"Naturally," said Scott, looking over at his wife. "We both were."

"Do you have any idea how Valerie knew?"

"I'm afraid not. We certainly didn't tell her."

"Well, you couldn't tell her if you didn't know yourselves, could you? You must have worked closely with Jacqui, though. Did she ever let anything slip?"

"Nothing. Look, Mr. Lang, I'm very sorry about Tony and everything. I've known him for a number of years and count him as a good friend as well as a business colleague, but don't you think the police know what they're about? He and Valerie did have a terrific row—we all witnessed that—and not long afterwards, she was dead. It makes sense. Any one of us could snap under pressure like that."

"Indeed we could," I said. "Any one of us. Where did you go after you left the restaurant?"

"We dropped Jacqui off at her apartment, then we went home," Ginny answered.

"Did anything unusual happen on the way?"

"No. Scott had had too much to drink, so I drove."

"Where's home?"

Scott answered this time. "Scarborough, down near the bluffs."

"So you weren't too far away from Tony and Valerie's place?"

Scott's bonhomie vanished in an instant, and he stuck his chin out. Ginny looked on coolly. "What are you getting at?" Scott said. "You come around here asking damnfool questions, and then you start accusing *me* of murdering Valerie?"

"I haven't accused you of anything," I said.

"You know what I mean. You certainly implied it."

"I merely implied that someone other than Tony could have done it." I looked at Ginny. "Did either of you go out after you got home?"

Ginny looked down at her hands folded on her lap before answering, "No."

"Of course we didn't," Scott snapped. But something was wrong. Ginny didn't want to look me in the eye, and Scott was blustering. Was she protecting him?

I took the safety-deposit-box key from my pocket. "Have either of you seen this before?"

They both looked genuinely puzzled. "No," said Scott.

"Never," said Ginny.

"Okay. Thanks for your time." I pocketed the key and headed back to my car.

Tony Caldwell's photographic studio was located in that urban wasteland of movie studios and sound stages between Eastern Avenue and the Gardiner, where Toronto pretends to be New York, London, and even a distant galaxy. At least parking in one of the

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vast empty lots was easier than around Spadina, which had cost me a small fortune. The studio had an empty feel to it, but Ray Dasgupta was in the office working at the computer. He stopped and looked up when I knocked and entered. I told him who I was and what I was doing.

"You probably think it's odd, me working here while all this is going on," he said.

"I suppose it takes your mind off other things," I said. "And no doubt there's work to be done."

"Mostly bookkeeping."

"What's going to happen to the studio now?"

"I don't know. Tony was the real creative energy behind us. I'm not much more than a glorified administrator. Oh, I know a shutter speed from an f-stop, but that's about as far as it goes. Tony has a flair for striking up relationships with his models . . ." He paused. "That wasn't meant to come out the way it did," he said. "I mean behind the camera."

"I know what you mean," I said. "But seeing as you mention it, how much do you know about these other relationships?"

Ray sucked on his lower lip, frowning.

"It's not that tough a question, Ray," I said. "Jacqui wasn't the first, was she?"

"How do you know?"

"Never mind. But if anyone ought to know, it's you, his partner. How many? How long?"

Ray squirmed in his chair. "Always," he said. "As long as I've known him, Tony's been chasing women. He couldn't seem to help himself."

"And Valerie didn't know?"

"I don't know whether she suspected or not, but she never acted as if she did. Not in public."

"And you think she would have done something if she'd known?"

"Yes. Valerie is a proud woman, and jealous, too, not someone to take an affair lightly. She might not have divorced Tony. After all, she'd given up her own career, and she liked the lifestyle, but . . ."

"Maybe she'd have killed him?"

"But he's not the one who's dead, is he?"

Still, it was another possible scenario. Maybe Jacqui was the last straw. Perhaps there'd been a struggle, Valerie with the knife, trying to kill Tony, and things had turned around. That didn't help me much, though, as he hadn't even tried to claim self-defense. "What do you think of Jacqui?" I asked.

Ray's lip curled. "Jumped-up little slut. It's not as if she can't have any man she wants. Why Tony? Why steal her best friend's husband?"

"And Valerie?"

Ray looked away, clearly disturbed by the question.

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"Ray? Something you want to tell me?"

"Look, I . . . I would never have . . . I mean . . ."

"Were you in love with her, Ray?"

His silence told me all I needed to know.

"Was it you who told Valerie about Tony and Jacqui?"

Ray jerked his head in an abrupt nod, then turned damp brown eyes on me. "How could he? How could he treat her like that? Oh, she never looked at me twice. It's not that I thought . . . or even hoped . . . but I couldn't bear to see it anymore, them carrying on the way they did, and Valerie not knowing."

"So you told her."

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just before dinner."

"Did you kill her, Ray?"

"Why would I kill her? I loved her."

"Maybe you went round to the house later and found her alone, Tony in the shower. You thought you were in with a chance now, but she turned you down, laughed at you, and you lost it. Is that how it happened, Ray?"

For a moment, I thought he was going to confess, then he said, "No. I didn't do it. But I'd have a closer look at Jacqui Prior if I were you."

"Why's that?"

"Because of something Valerie said when I told her about the affair."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'I'll ruin her. The little bitch. You see if I don't. And don't think I can't do it, either.'"

6.

"You'd better not have come around with more of those ridiculous accusations," Jacqui Prior said, flopping on the sofa and crossing her long legs.

I took out the safety-deposit-box key and held it in front of her. "I've been talking to Tony," I said, "and we've been through some of Valerie's papers. According to her Visa bills, there's an annual fee of forty dollars at a BC credit union. The people there were not forthcoming, but they did admit that Valerie rented a safety-deposit box. I asked myself why she kept a box in Vancouver when she lived in Toronto."

"And?"

"It's my guess she got it while she was still living there, and she doesn't need frequent access."

"So it's probably empty."

"But why keep paying? She can't have forgotten about it. The

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annual bill would remind her."

"So what's your explanation, great detective?"

"That there's something in it she wants to keep."

"And how does that relate to me?"

"The two of you grew up in Vancouver."

"So?"

"What's in the box, Jacqui?"

"I've no idea."

"You're lying."

"How dare you!"

"What's in it? Was it worth killing her over?"

"I didn't kill her."

"So you say. But the way it looks to me is that you had the best motive. You were having an affair with her husband. She threatened you. And she was keeping something in a safety-deposit box in Vancouver that may be related to you."

"That's just conjecture."

"But it's pretty reasonable conjecture, you must admit."

"I'm admitting nothing."

"Well," I said, standing to leave, "the police will probably be less polite than me, and there'll no doubt be media interest. Your choice, Jacqui. If you're innocent, you'd be far better off telling me the truth. I don't have to tell anyone."

I could see her thinking over her options: Whether to tell me anything. How much to tell. How many lies she might get away with. In the end, she came to a decision. "I need a drink first," she said, and went over to the cocktail cabinet and poured herself a Pernod. It turned cloudy when she added a few drops of water. As an afterthought, she asked me if I wanted anything. I said no.

"Strictly between you and me?"

"Of course."

"When Valerie dropped her little bombshell and all hell broke loose, I took her to the washroom."

"I've always wondered what went on in there."

"She told me she'd ruin me."

"How?"

"When Val and I were students," Jacqui said, "we were . . . well, to put it mildly, we were a bit wild. We got into coke and stuff in a fairly big way and it can skewer your judgment. There was a man. We thought it would be fun to make a video. He didn't know. No copies. Only the original. Need I say more?"

"The three of you?"

"Yes."

"And Valerie kept this?"

"I told you she liked control."

"Why would she want to have control over you?"

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"Not me, you fool. Him. He was a politician. Still is, and climbing the ranks."

"So Valerie used it to blackmail him?"

"She never used it for anything, as far as I know."

"But that gave him a motive for killing her. Who is he?"

"He didn't even know about it. I'm sure of that."

"But Valerie threatened to use it against you?"

"Yes. This Cherub contract is a really big deal, and I need to be squeaky-clean. It's a family line, so if it got around that their cherub wasn't quite as cherubic as they thought, I think you can see where that might lead."

"The unemployment line?"

"Exactly."

"You do realize, don't you, that you've just given me another motive for your killing Valerie? If she made the video public, you'd have been ruined."

"No. You don't understand. There was no video."

Now it was my turn to look puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"You don't think I wanted that thing lying around, do you? I can make myself look enough like Valerie to fool people, especially strangers behind the counter in a bank, and her signature is easy enough to forge. One day, while she was at the dentist's, I borrowed her key and her ID."

"So you're saying—"

"Valerie didn't know, because she never checked from one year to the next, but the video was gone. I destroyed it. That safety-deposit box was empty."

"Then who . . . ?"

Jacqui put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, no," she said, turning pale. "Oh, God, no!"

"You again," said Scott when I called at their Scarborough home early that evening. I had spent the rest of the afternoon doing the sort of digging I usually do when I'm not investigating murders. Ginny walked through from the kitchen and nodded a curt greeting.

"What can I help you with this time?" Scott asked.

"When you were driving Jacqui home from the restaurant the night Valerie was murdered, you asked her about what went on in the washroom, didn't you?"

"So what? I was curious."

"And she told you that Valerie had threatened her with something that could ruin the whole Cherub deal."

"She did? I don't remember."

"Oh, come off it, Scott! You mean to tell me you were so curious you can't even remember what she told you?"

"What does it matter?"

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I leaned forward. "It matters because it gave you a motive to kill Valerie."

"That's absurd."

"No, it's not. I've been doing a bit of research this afternoon, and I've discovered that your precious agency is in serious financial trouble. You're in debt up to your eyeballs—second mortgages, the lot—and you can't afford to lose the Cherub contract. When you thought that was in jeopardy, you knew you had to get rid of Valerie. Maybe you planned on killing them both, but when you saw Tony wasn't there, you changed your plan."

"It's an interesting theory," said Scott, "but that's all it is."

I knew he was right. What I'd discovered, and what Jacqui had told me, might point the police in Scott's direction, but they'd need much more if Tony were to be set free.

"You know what the sad thing is?" I said. "You did it all for nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"Jacqui was upset. All she said was that Valerie had threatened to ruin her. What she didn't mention was that she no longer had the means to do it. You killed Valerie Pascale for nothing, Scott."

Ginny turned pale. "What did you say?" she asked.

"Don't, Ginny!" Scott warned her.

But it was too late. Ginny glanced at her husband, turned back to me, and said, "Do you think for a moment I would let her destroy everything we'd worked for?" She looked over tenderly at Scott, who was gnawing on a fingernail. All his deepest fears had now come true. If he wasn't an accomplice and had, indeed, passed out, he must at least have suspected and worried that the truth would come out. "She deserved to die," Ginny went on. "She was going to ruin all of us just because of a stupid adolescent affair. And now you tell us it was all for nothing." Her laugh sounded like a harsh bark.

"You still have no evidence," Scott said. "Ginny will deny everything. Do you realize what you're doing? You could ruin all of us, Jacqui, Tony, Ray included."

I stood up to leave. "Jacqui will survive. And so will Ray. The one thing neither of you seem to have given a moment's thought to," I said as I headed for the door, "is that Tony Caldwell is awaiting trial on a murder charge. A murder he didn't commit. Think about that when you lament your business losses."

After I'd shut the door behind me, I slid my hand in my inside pocket and turned off the tiny digital recorder that had been on the whole time I'd been with Scott and Ginny. Maybe it wouldn't stand up in court, but it would be enough to get Tony free and reopen the case. And, who knows, perhaps Susan Caldwell would be grateful enough to have dinner with me. We could talk about Darwin's influence on Wordsworth. ●

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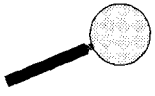

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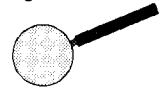

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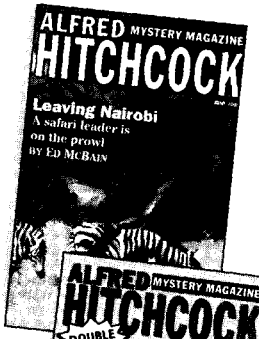

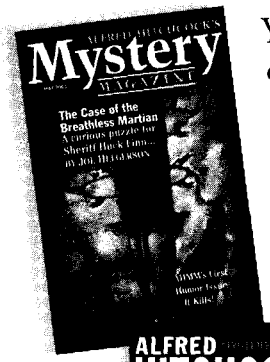

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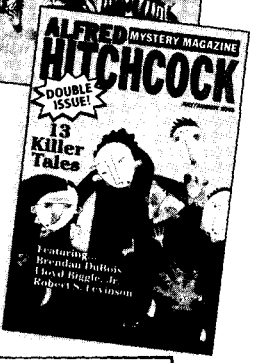

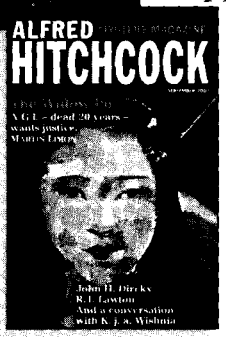

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